

COMPARATIVE INSIGHT INTO DEVELOPMENT OF THE CIVIC SOCIETY IN THE VISEGRAD REGION

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Summary: “Modern society was formed in the age of great revolutions which, on one hand gave a birth to a relatively autonomous individual, and on the other hand to whole integral structure of modern social system (Keller 2004). The term of civic society itself may not be analysed via comparison of antinomies or different understandings in the framework of ideological spectrum. Its understanding in the background of its historical and philosophical development is essential because of the complexity of the existing societies. A rediscovery of the term of civic society was helped especially by societal and political conditions arisen from the development of the society in the middle of 20th century. Totalitarian regime cancelled a separation of society from a state, it subjugated civic society to the state and excluded validity of many rights and freedoms existing before the state and originally independent on it. Additionally an absence of the existence of civic society was experienced especially in the societies strongly centralised and in which the only political-economical-ideological hierarchy did not tolerate any competitor, and the only conception defined not only the truth but the individual morality as well. In such situation there arose a need of a new ideal which would be re-established in an idea of civic society, in the ideas of institutional and ideological plurality

preventing from an establishment of power and truth monopoly and balancing the working of state institutions willing to gain monopolistic position. What is hidden under the term civic society?

Keywords: civic society, Visegrad region, modern society, social system, modernity.

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“Modern society was formed in the age of great revolutions which, on one hand gave a birth to a relatively autonomous individual, and on the other hand to whole integral structure of modern social system (Keller 2004). Jan Keller in one of his works stated that the development of society has caused “....a gradual emancipation of an individual from the obsolete relations of a community type. This has become a significant feature of modernity“ (Keller 2004:435). Nevertheless, the modern society has also been under gradual differentiation of the individual components of the society. Mr. Keller as well as other sociologists evaluates the developmental processes as a desirable demonstration of modernization but at the same time they warn against possible negative consequences.

It was not easy for the current term of civic society to gain its popularity and potential. It is more useful to add a sociological meaning in a form of existence of institutional pluralism than to return to ideological traditions it has come from. The term of civic society itself may not be analysed via comparison of antinomies or different understandings in the framework of ideological spectrum. Its understanding in the background of its historical and philosophical development is essential because of the complexity of the existing societies. A rediscovery of the term of civic society was helped especially by societal and political conditions arisen from the development of the society in the middle of 20th century. Before that, a man engaging in the conception of civic society was considered to be a historian mainly because the term itself did not evoke anything lively and useable. However, due to the above reasons it was rediscovered and has become an ideal. The reasons are easy to explain. State of a society, this term relates

to, has become highly appreciated and politically attractive. It was not possible to talk about an existence of working civic society in many countries and people began to perceive this shortness, and one may say that it began hinder them.

Totalitarian regime cancelled a separation of society from a state, it subjugated civic society to the state and excluded validity of many rights and freedoms existing before the state and originally independent on it. „In this extreme form of political society, the societal organisations were not considered an autonomous expression of interests but an additional tool of their amelioration and supervision. Therefore, restoration of the individual autonomy and civic society has become the main task of deetatistation to prevent from the expansionism of the state, as the main goal. However, it does not mean that such danger is connected with a state only, because its source exists in a civic society as well. State can be then used only as a kind of power instrument. Therefore, the restoration of civic society also has this qualitative dimension - it requires restoration of democratic citizenship and civic virtues“ (Šamalik 1995: 146). An absence of the existence of civic society was experienced especially in the societies strongly centralised and in which the only political-economical-ideological hierarchy did not tolerate any competitor, and the only conception defined not only the truth but the individual morality as well. As a result, „rest of the society approached to the condition of atomization and a dissident became an enemy of peoples and regime.“ (Gellner 1997: 7).

In such situation there arose a need of a new ideal which would be re-established in an idea of civic society, in the ideas of institutional and ideological plurality preventing from an establishment of power and truth monopoly and balancing the working of state institutions willing to gain monopolistic position. What is hidden under the term civic society? The simplest and also the most comprehensive definition of the civic society comes from Ernst Gellner: „Civic society is such complex of non – governmental institutions that is strong enough to function as a counterbalance to the state, while it leaves the state a function of a peace guarantor and arbiter of fundamental interests, it prevents it to atomise the rest of the society and keep it under its control.“ (Gellner 1997: 10).

Nevertheless, this definition is not a rare one. Sociologist Jürgen Habermas followed sociological conception of liberalism which established interpretation of civic society on the idea of a human as a self – confident subject governed only by laws connected with a social contract. „Civic society is a complex of interpersonal relations, rules and responsibilities arising from this contract (Bělohradský 1994:5).

Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought characterises civic society as an evolutionary stage of society which is synonymic to the term of political society. In its later meaning it is perceived as a societal and economical arrangement of principles and institutions outside the state framework referring to so called non – political aspects of the present social order (Miller 2000: 67).

Slovak political scientists and authors of the Short dictionary of political science characterize civic society as a „term has been used in social – political theory since the 18th century to define societal and, in a narrow sense, proprietary conditions. Under the influence of natural law theory, civic society was understood as an impact of natural qualities of human, forms of government, and morality. Present political-science literature distinguishes between political society, i.e. the area of public authority and state force, and its basis – civic society as a complex of non – governmental institutions and social organisms.” (Tóth, Krno, Kulašik 1990: 50).

Different individual approaches of various authors, ideological views, historical development and action in different political systems influenced variety of the definitions. Primary assumptions of existence and of identification signs represent a link of any interpretation. Democratic political system comprises a fundamental assumption of existence of a civic society. Thus, we may interpret the civic society as a space among individual interests and public solidarity. A citizen has a possibility of self – realisation through associations, churches, economic associations, trade unions, and independent groups. Civic society presents a space for people to learn how to participate in the power and tolerance.

Current Polish political scientist J. Mielecký characterizes civic society as an instrument to reduce a room of state working which at the same time makes the political

system itself active by an influencing the decision – making processes, rules of functioning, ways of realisation. At the same time, it defines conditions for its existence and development: “standard functioning of civic society and its development is conditioned by a democratisation of political life of the society, and of cultural interaction with political system“ (Lysý 2003: 69). Under these conditions, civic society could be defined as “a sphere of human existence outside from the immediate influence of a state power, and it has been more and more contently used as the characteristics of a community of fully sovereign citizens who may take an active part in democratic creation and control of state power, as well as the social and economical organisation, principles and institutions standing outside the state framework, referring to apolitical aspects of the present social order“ (Lysý 2003: 70).

According to another view, “civic society presents a set of organisations of public interest the main task of which is to modify the existing social – political structures (Gažiová 1999). Such organisations of public interest represent an asset while creating a social structure, at creation of political system and public institutions as well as in the process of division of competences and power decentralization. Thus, under conditions of the current democracies it comprises “an establishment of so called third sector which is outside the formal state apparatus while it has a particular influence on public authorities since it ensures needs of the citizens and at the same time it supervises whether and how they are provided by the state“ (Feřková 1997: 169). Based on Gabriela Feřková’s opinion the third sector is made up of non – governmental organisations the aim of which is to “learn a man not to rely only on the state’s help but to act while asserting his /her own needs as well as the needs of the whole society“ (Feřková 1997: 169). Variety in development and understanding the civic society we can consider under examples of its creation in the V 4 countries at the present time.

The Czech republic – Czech political scientists in the discussion about civic society analyse especially the problem of purpose of its existence. Dualism in this discussion has appeared in this discussion on the side of the conservatives (on the head with the current Czech president Václav Klaus)

who perceive this discussion as a discussion about possibility of an effective governance, and, on the other side, the group (represented by the last federal and the first Czech president Václav Havel) that perceive this discussion especially as an “issue of authenticity in politics”. The discourse has turned political decisions and views into ordinary cliché which evoked false expectations in the citizens about what the politics is able to give them” (Žák 2003: 319). The initiatives as Impuls 99 (Impulse 99) or Děkujeme, odejděte (Thank you, leave away) comprised at the end of 20th century the most significant activity of the Czech civic society. While analysing them it is necessary to note that they did not accomplish a basic characteristic feature – to work as a counterbalance to the political system. “An effort to directly influence political sphere was their specific feature. They exemplarily persuaded that in case there are not exactly defined limits and the relation between politics and civic activity“ (Žák 2003: 333) existence of civic activities, initiatives and associations is not effective. On the other hand, it is necessary to mention some successful civic initiatives such as “Manifest spisovatelů politikům” (Writers’ Manifesto to Politicians) from 1917 or Charta 77 (Charter 77). In spite of the fact that the first one was written in the war time and the latter one in the time of normalization, their influence on the political scene was not insignificant. However, after some years they lost their influence, it is necessary to remind them. „Both the civic initiatives got into a magnetic field of the politics due to their success. We can thank them that they graphically showed us the core of their differences from political party. While in a working political party there must be a central authority able to act as one after the discussion, a civic initiative lacking of such an authority is never able to decide to act. And in case it can do so, it splits under its first conflict“ (Žák 2003: 333). Therefore, the Czech civic society is typical for its interconnection with politics that disables it to work effectively in a modern understanding of the civic society as the counterbalance to the state. The depth of its misunderstanding comes out not only from historical facts but also from the attitude of the public. In spite of that, looking at the development since 90th, we must say that civic society has been still developing and has taken the right

direction to reach rational and effective operation according to the examples of developed democracies.

The **Republic of Poland** comprises another example of development of civic society in the region. In the 90s Europe underwent a wave of transformation which changed conditions of political systems of the Central - European countries. Poland was the first country which *started the transformation wave in the Central – European region* mainly due to civic society having already started to be active. As one of the most famous initiatives may be movement Solidarity especially, activities of which came from the *below*. Its existence and activity may be tracked couple of years back, but for its activities in favour of the citizens it came under prohibition to act by the ruling Communist party. Regardless this fact the movement continued to work and in 1989, also thanks to the Tadeusz Mazowiecki's position as the Prime minister contributed to overthrow of the authoritarian regime and to establishment of democracy, as the first one in the Central Europe.

The first relatively free and partly democratic elections were held in 1989. The civic movement Solidarity reached not only its aim- economic and social rights for working class, but also markedly contributed to establishment of democratic political system. At the same time, it showed other countries that civic initiatives arising from below and united by a common aim are proven to be effective and do not stop their activity at the very first conflict. In this point, for further analyse, we must add that Solidarity managed to associate people with different views (the left- oriented, radicals, right-oriented, conservatives as well as liberals) just having a common aim. Civic society built on such principle becomes an equal partner to the state institutions, and alongside it provides a space for all citizens to participate in the public power.

In **Hungary** the third sector (in a narrow understanding as a civic society) restored its activities in 1987 when a new Act on Foundations and Non- Governmental Organisation was adopted. These organisations significantly helped to adopt an Act on Associations and Their Rights in 1989. At the beginning of the millennium, in Hungary there were approximately 60 thousand non- governmental organisations with nearly 400

thousand volunteers (The Visegrad Yearbook 2003; 2004: 193), it is the highest number in Visegrad region. Based on legal enactments, the actors of civic society act in the form of associations, foundations and unincorporated associations. There is a need to stress that some types of organisations may be found by the state and its institutions only. That was the way how the state determined limits for the existence and operation of the civic society. Act on new organisations was adopted in 1993, and Act on Public Service in 1997. At the beginning of 90th development of civic society was supported also by the state through establishment of so – called 1% tax contribution. This contribution created better space for citizens to participate in civic society.

In the last decade of the 20th century, the civic society in Hungary could be characterised by dualism derived from a founder of the single unincorporated associations (up to 10% of non – governmental organisations and associations were founded by the state). Currently, the civic society has been too polarized. Modern trends including legal and economical regulations, rights and duties of non – governmental organisation have caused that the third sector is able to unify only in the area of the same interests, now. The solid complex that could be equal partner in the communication with the state and could fill in the gap between the citizens and state institutions is not so easy to create. As first, it is necessary to clearly define a space for unincorporated associations, to define the role of the civic society itself, and to set economical and legal frameworks for its existence.

Civic society in the **Slovak republic** has developed in similar dimensions as in the other neighbouring countries of Central – Europe. In many points it reflected development in the Czech republic, the difference lays in more active attitude of Slovak citizens to public administration. The common campaign before the 1998 Parliamentary elections may be considered an evident demonstration of operating of the civic society. Thousands of volunteers took a part in the campaign OK '98 helped by foreign observers and funds. This campaign gave a birth to the first founders of non – governmental organizations and first founders of unincorporated associations. The Slovak civic society is characterised by

rather big decentralisation, namely based on the activities they deal with.

Interconnecting to delegation of competences, we can see this trend also in the existence of unincorporated associations, too. They work especially at regional level and their activities fill in the space between local authorities and their citizens. On the other hand, there exist national unincorporated associations active all over the country. In many cases they often are equal partner to the state authorities, for example as expert consultants in a law-making process (members of non – governmental organisations were members of a working team preparing the law about the conflict of interests, amendments of Political Parties Act, etc.).

Contemporary modern civic society in the Visegrad region countries reflects especially principle of creating the initiatives and civic activities from below coming right from the citizens and their needs. Also the civic society should be created in this sense at the European level and represent the needs of the member states citizens against the European institutions.

Conclusion

The 19th century may be, for a part of Europe, characterised by an existence of centralised states that, however holding monopoly of their power, did not cause powerlessness and could not prevent from disintegration of the society. There was established, though, a segmented society as an alternative to the state and inner opposition against state power. However, its main goal was to be active within the system, they started to fight against this disintegration and new phenomena. That was a ground for separation of civic society not only from the state but also from its instruments and institutions, and thus a basis for formation of a new arrangement of the society.

Civic society is based on separation of a political arrangement from economic and social life, namely when combined with absence of domination of those keeping the power over the life of the society. Political centralism, though, is inevitable as in the modern world economic and social units may not fulfil also role of institutions ensuring the order. Economic pluralism, in connection with political control, is

literally required. Autonomy of the economy is necessary in favour of its effectiveness but also due to ensured pluralism with social basis that may be not found anywhere else. Intellectual and ideological pluralism is required for an effective working of the civic society.

Thus the civic society becomes a significant reinforcement of new political system being established on the basis of falling socialistic establishment. It is represented by a volume of associations and institutions strong enough to avoid from state tyranny, and by those open for every citizen to freely enter and leave anytime with no eventual consequences.

The civic society created under changed social conditions of the Visegrad region is characteristic by its bottom-up creation. The actors comprise incorporated associations active at national, but at the present time more-less at the regional level. They struggle for filling a gap in communication between citizens and state and its institutions. However, in many cases their activity is limited by the funds. Civic society in the Visegrad regions has been established differently depending on historical and social conditions, economic situation as well as cultural forwardness and civic involvement. Poland was the first state that started *revitalisation* of its civic society in the region. Successes of the civic movement "Solidarity" supported an idea of active functioning of the civic society in the former Czechoslovakia as well as in Hungary. A particular difference may be seen as in the participation at civic society creations, structure of its members as well as legislation and other determinants of its existence. Common signs, though, comprise a perception of civic society as a counterbalance to state institutions and possibility of realisation of civic activities in a public life.

Referring to creation of the European Union, also civic society gets new volume. Its function has changed, recent informal functioning has been alternated by formalised cooperation within the European Economic and Social Committee. Those times there were many questions to be answered –what direction the civic society is to develop under the new conditions?, how the cooperation will be changed under elimination of barriers created by the member states' borders?, and others.

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