

Dr Rupert Graf Strachwitz

Europe Bottom-Up: Civil Society as Political Culture?

Introduction

“Politics is too important to be left to politicians.”

It was Markus Meckel, a politician, who said that when delivering a key note address in Wroclaw in October 2016, albeit one who had been an activist in what may be described as one of civil society’s finest hours before he became East Germany’s last Foreign Minister in 1990. At that time, civil society in Poland, Hungary, East Germany and what was then Czechoslovakia as well as in many other countries of Central and Eastern Countries wrote history. Today we are faced with a shrinking space for civil society, as governments are attempting to curb civil society action by regulation, harassment and infringement on civil and human rights.

Given this scenario, it seemed more than timely to come together and discuss the relationship between civil society and political culture. Wroclaw, the vibrant European Capital of Culture 2016, seemed a perfect place to do so, and a number of Polish and German organisations joined forces to set up a conference small enough to have an intense debate, and yet diverse enough to allow for different points of view to be put forward. The two days were well spent in trying to fathom out the position of civil society today and the tasks that lie ahead of us.

After 1990, it had been hoped that a new world order might be created after the end of the Cold War. This did not happen. As Anna Domaradzka pointed out, the welfare state was replaced by the corporate state, market logic entered the public sphere, and no effort was made to render the 1989 civil society hype sustainable. In Western Europe, governments failed to realize the value of a strong civil society for the development of democracy; they concentrated on promoting capitalism and staying in the driver’s seat without realizing they were losing power to the business sector. This, with other reasons, led to the total erosion of citizens’ trust in the political establishment.

While Polish colleagues pointed to serious threats in their own country, what Eszter Markus reported from Hungary was shattering. The systematic closing of the space for any civil society action not in line with government policy in a member country of the European Union should be a grave concern to all Europeans. Nobody can be sure such developments will not be seen in Western Europe. Alarmingly, voices are being heard not only talking about a post-

democratic era, but actually embracing it. Capitalism without democracy seems to work in China, so why not elsewhere? Against this backdrop, Steve Austen's insistence on the legitimacy and legal status of the European citizen as laid down in the Lisbon Treaty appeared even more relevant. To accommodate minorities, ethnic and cultural groups, and indeed civil society organisations is one of the most important aims of this clause in the basis document of the European Union. Its enforcement is at risk!

So what is the way forward? Clearly, not only democracy, but society as a whole is in crisis in Europe. Controls, security mania, competition, and a petty power game have replaced trust, civic values, respect for one another, a cooperative spirit, and a sense of common goals and direction. People everywhere associate this with the traditional political elites, and refuse to take the political successes in bringing the Europeans closer together into account. Increasingly, and alarmingly, they are falling for populist slogans and leaders set on turning back the wheel of history. It is high time for those citizens to take on the responsibility, who are determined to face the real challenges of our time. It is time for civil society to take the initiative, set the agenda, and develop the arguments needed. Civil society as a pluralist bottom-up experience must become the blue-print for a new political culture. To this end, civic education and civic empowerment are of essence. For unlike the state that comes to you, and the market that tries to come to you, civil society does not. It depends on the citizens themselves to take action.

This is no mean task. Not only is civil society perennially underfunded. It is also undergoing a period of re-birth, from formal to informal, from institutional to social movement, from subservience to government to an independent arena. Yet, looking at Europe, its spirit has only survived through networks, personal relationships and interaction of citizens – in short, by building and, time after time, rebuilding trust. Therefore, it would seem that the sorely needed new political order will only be created and only achieve sustainability if it embraces a participative approach and actively engages in the everlasting discussion on what needs to change to promote the common good. To this end, relying on the political mechanisms of the 19th and 20th centuries, will not suffice. A new political framework, a new political culture will have to emerge from the crisis.

A small group of people assembled in Wroclaw from Poland, Germany, Georgia, Hungary, the Netherlands, and the United States, easily agreed with Adam Chmielewski¹ when he said „Civil Society surges in crises!“ It is to be hoped that he will be proven right.

¹ The paper Adam Chmielewski gave on the occasion of the Wroclaw conference, titled Bonding or Bridging? Empowerment as a Task of Civil Society Activism is published separately as No. 12 of the Maecenata Foundation's OBSERVATORIUM series: <http://www.maecenata.eu/images/MO-12.pdf>

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