



Civil Society in Macedonia

Why Values Matter...

The international and national non-governmental organizations present in Macedonia pride themselves on the positive impact they have on Macedonian society. In defense of the importance of the work these organizations are doing they refer to theories that attribute a very positive role to civil society organizations. Civil society is often seen as the 'cure-all' for many of society's problems and more specifically for the well functioning of its democratic institutions.

It was the French historian and political writer Alexis de Tocqueville that 'discovered' the positive works of civil society on his trip to the United States of America in 1831¹. What he encountered was a flourishing civil society in which every social, political, economical, religious and ideological faction was represented. He spoke of the organizations in this civil society as "schools of democracy" referring to the positive effects these organizations had on their members ability to self-organize to solve the problems in their community and, by doing so, to be better able to judge the effectiveness of politicians in dealing with problems on the bigger scale.

With his 'Making democracy work, civic traditions in modern Italy' the contemporary author Robert Putnam points to the stark difference between the performance of regional governments in the north of Italy and the south of Italy which he attributes to the presence of a flourishing civil society in the north and the lack of civil society organizations in the south². The roots for the positive effects of civil society on democracy lies in, what Putnam calls, 'bonding-' and 'bridging social capital'; with bonding social capital referring to intra-group social ties and values like trust and friendship and bridging social capital revering to the social ties, the presence of trust and the willingness to cooperate between individuals from different ethnic- and socio- economic backgrounds.

The main problem with applying these popular theories of civil society and democracy to the Macedonian case is that there is no flourishing civil society in Macedonia³. The civil society like organizations present in Yugoslavia were very much intermingled with the communist regime and after the fall of communism civil society in Macedonia did not come to resemble the civil societies characteristic of the countries in Western Europe and the United States⁴.

Picture: civil society fair in 2001 in Aleksander Palace Hotel in Skopje, source: **Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (2003)**. *Ten year, 1993-2003*. Skopje, Macedonian Center for International Cooperation

1 Tocqueville, Alexis de. (1840). *Democracy in America 2*. Translated to Engels by H. Mansfield and D. Winthrop (2001), University of Chicago Press, 511

2 Putnam, Robert D. (1993). *Making democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, Princeton University Press

3 World Values Survey (1998). World Values Survey Macedonia 1998.

[www.worldvaluessurvey.org] maart 2007

Furthermore, most of the non governmental organizations present in Macedonia are not actually 'grass rooted' in society⁵. An often heard critique on Macedonian non governmental organizations is that they stop doing what they claim to do out of passion and commitment to solving the problems the moment the international donors close the money-taps.

The authors Chambers and Kopstein mention that Putnam's one-sided positive view of the democratic effects of civil society stems from the fact that he compares the positive effects of the participation of citizens in the civil society with the negative effects of their non-participation. Putnam's civil society has to counter a society in which citizens are apathetic and threaten to lapse into anonymity⁶. But as Chambers and Kopstein write "sometimes the cure is worse than the disease"⁷ and unlike Putnam they focus on the ideological character of organizations in the civil society and on the values that these organizations promote to determine whether they have a positive or negative impact on democracy.

While the civil society of Macedonia is underdeveloped and the international and Macedonian non-governmental organizations are not rooted in society we see that almost all of the latter adhere to, and are indeed inspired by, values of democracy and human rights. There are those organizations that fight poverty or strive for the rights of underprivileged minorities and those that are involved in 'making democracy work' in an even more direct way by for example providing trainings to local politicians or analyzing government policy.

And what's more, many organizations in Macedonia focus on improving citizens' capacities to actively participate in the newly decentralized democratic system and in society as a whole (in which endeavor the promotion of positive values also plays a vital role). And thus there is room to be hopeful for a civil society in Macedonia as Tocqueville and Putnam would (have) like(d) to see...

4 United Nations Development Program (1999). *FYR of Macedonia, National Human Development Report 1999: Civil Society in transition*. Skopje, UNDP

5 CIVICUS (2005). *An assesment of Macedonian civil society: 15 years of transition, a country moving towards citizen participation*. Skopje, CIVICUS & Macedonian Center for International Cooperation

6 Putnam, Robert D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. NewYork, Simon and Schuster.

7 Chambers, S., Kopstein, J. (2001). "Bad Civil Society", *Political Theory*, Vol. 29, No. 6, 841