

Civil society - a hope against corruption in Central and Eastern Europe

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Corruption has since recently become a matter of considerable public concern and debate in Central and Eastern Europe. [\[1\]](#) The Transparency International (TI) Corruption Perception Index shows that corruption is regarded as the prime danger in almost all of the transition countries in Central and Eastern Europe, [\[2\]](#) endangering the equal distribution of wealth, undermining public confidence in government, and weakening the free market system and rule of law. The promising achievements of democratic institutions are threatened if corruption cannot be brought under control. Governments in the region – often under international pressure – are taking steps against corruption and towards transparency. Civil society, as a third sector in a new governance structure, is a potent force capable of creating the pressure on governments necessary to combat corruption.

Civil society can play a crucial role in wiping out the authoritarian heritage of concentrated and uncontrolled power that breeds corruption. Through civil society participation, people can express themselves and resist abuses and intrusions by the government. Civil society can also be a link to the external world, informing relevant international actors of the developments domestically and bringing important change.

Civil society as a player

In the century of globalisation, civil society is considered a dominant player on a par with governments and businesses. Civil society (NGOs, think tanks, trade unions, religious associations, among others) is defined as "the totality of groups and individuals in a country, who show a regular concern for the social and political context in that country, without fulfilling the function of political parties, who are autonomous from the government, and to whose goals also belongs to monitor the activity of the government or certain specific consequences of it, as well as to resist by legitimate means any unlawful, dangerous or abusive government activity." [\[3\]](#)

There are several reasons why civil society is indispensable in carrying out war on corruption. First, civil society ranks the improvement of peoples' lives as the top priority and an end in itself. Second, civil society organisations are usually independent – and therefore presumptively objective – watchdogs, monitoring implementation of governmental commitments to combat corruption. Third, civil society can fill the legislative and policy gap by, on the one hand, advancing anti-corruption proposals that may not be normally supported by political parties, and, on the other hand, assessing potentially negative consequences of measures proposed by other political actors. For example, civil society organizations can oppose dubious legislative bills and/or advocate rights of vulnerable groups that are numerically too small to have political weight vis-à-vis economic interest groups.

The last but not least factor speaking in favour of an autonomous civil society as a counter-force to corruption is the fact that it operates primarily on the basis of ideas, rather than prestige, power, or money. Public interest associations rarely if ever have at their disposal – or under their control – financial resources matching the wealth of businesses and other economic groups. However, civil society associations attract altruistically inclined people, ready to dedicate their energy and talents to noble causes, and work hard to promote their ideals for very modest compensation. Such human resources confer on civil society strong moral appeal and immunity to corruption. Not surprisingly, it was civil society that initiated in the Czech Republic the peaceful shift from the old to new regime, the "Velvet Revolution." [\[4\]](#)

Challenges to civil society

However, the real picture is not as rosy, and history must be taken into account. During the period of concentrated political power and central economic planning, clientelism and corruption took firm root in the society. People became accustomed to routinely bribing authorities at offices, hospitals, schools and in courts. Authorities turned a blind eye on and even encouraged such practices. The general climate of tolerance almost legitimised corruption. At present, holes still exist in the anti-bribery laws, and bribery continues. Only very recently have international conventions relating to corruption started to emerge, and only recently have governments initiated anti-corruption programmes. At the same time, governments exacerbate the problem, since they often lack credibility even when promoting anti-corruption strategies. Many public officials are either not fully aware of their responsibilities or plainly evade their duties.

Although the public is called upon not to pay bribes, to report incidents of corruption to responsible authorities, not to sell their votes, many have not changed their habits and attitudes. Most often civil society organisations cooperate with media in anti-corruption advocacy. In the Czech Republic, for example, TV spots accompanied by a satirical poster campaign promoting anti-corruption messages. Likewise, in Slovakia an image of a condescending and thieving public official is used in the media for civic education. The influence of anti-corruption messages on the public has been limited, however.

Civil society that existed during the Communist period, surviving the repressive measures directed at it, was traditionally a critical voice against the government. However, presently, Western organisations struggle and lose committed cooperation from civil societies in Central and Eastern Europe conditioning support on a “friendly attitude” towards the post-Communist authorities, even corrupt ones.

In addition, civil society organisations themselves are often implicated in corruption that flourishes in the legal and institutional fields. Clientelism is a particular problem. In transition countries, often the same party that wins the elections also has a majority in parliament or controls a large proportion of the state-owned economic sector. Power concentrated in a few hands is then slowly leading to a situation of generalised clientelism, involving even civil society organisations that have difficulties obtaining financial support for their activities.

Although external aid to civil society is challenging this system, some governments have taken up a surprising strategy. They establish an artificial “civil society,” indirectly financed by the government (quasi-NGOs or “Quangos”). The structure of this artificial civil sector is also a legacy of the past, rather than the reflection of current social needs. Most Quangos in the Czech Republic and Slovakia are active in the fields of education (private schools), social care (residential homes or service centres for handicapped or aged persons) and culture (museums, libraries, galleries, theatres, cinemas, etc.). In other words, the state traditionally supports activities that do not present political threat or challenge. Loyal persons and groups can also be rewarded through this paternalistic system. After some time, the state-created “civil society” threatens to overshadow and overtake the authentic civil society.

To some extent, failures in the fight against corruption can be attributed to the fact that some NGOs have not been active enough in vindicating civic interests. Due to its relatively early stage of development and institutionalisation, civil society is still not in a position to exercise adequate control over public administration or influence political institutions, and therefore has not always presented strong resistance to corruption.

To overcome these obstacles, in conducting anti-corruption activities civil society must activate and mobilise all its elements. NGOs should engage in action-oriented policy dialogue with representatives of government, businesses, academia and media to ensure integrated cooperation sustainability of anti-corruption efforts. In addition, sub-national, national, and international institutions participating and/or providing assistance for anti-corruption programmes should not be forgotten in the synergy. National anti-corruption organisations can reach international recognition of their activities and influence international donors, which base their funding decisions on the level of transparency in a country. Single-issue organisations can attain higher professional and technical level, and many civil society groups can demonstrate still greater willingness to work with other organisations in a run for powerful global potential.

These objectives could be reached by collecting concrete, specific and action-oriented data and information needed to understand and address corruption. The greater the information available, the more convinced the public becomes of the need for action. Access to information is a public right and an absolute deterrent to corruption. Information should be exchanged through an electronic network and media aimed at bringing issues to the attention of the public. Proposals about the development, implementation, and review of anti-corruption programmes should be developed and disseminated among all civil society actors. Action planning workshops and training programmes can help prepare investigative journalists and monitors to report on corruption. Media, one of the most effective and important agents and partners of civil society organisations, need to report objectively and raise public awareness.

To conclude, civil society should definitely be reckoned as a cure for taming corruption, notwithstanding difficulties the development process brings. Various actors comprising civil society – citizen groups, NGOs, trade unions, think tanks, academia, religious associations and of course media – can all play an important role in curbing corruption. In a bid to succeed in combating corruption it is important for civil society organisations to work at advancing their own structures and sharpening their own skills. The powerful global potential of a civil society must be empowered by raising public concern and support to become effective.

Footnotes



[1] Transparency International, an international movement dedicated to increasing government accountability and curbing corruption both on national and international levels, defines corruption as “the misuse of public power for private gain.” See here: <http://www.tji.ee/en/tie/mis-on-korruptsioon/definitions.html>.

[2] Available here: http://www.transparency.org/pressreleases_archive/2002/2002.08.28.cpi.en.html.

[3] See here: <http://www.areda.ch/P08E.html>.

[4] A wave of public protests and manifestations of civic disobedience rose in 1988 as a result of general dissatisfaction with the Communist regime. 40,000 citizens signed a petition calling for a dialogue with the government. The Communist leaders eventually agreed to a dialogue, leading to the fall of the regime. The government of “National Understanding” was set up. Vaclav Havel, a prominent dissident, was elected the President. Czechoslovakia set for a restoration of the parliamentary democracy and integration within the European structures.