

AN ASSESSMENT OF CZECH CIVIL SOCIETY IN 2004:  
**after fifteen years of development**

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CIVICUS Civil Society Index Report  
for the Czech Republic<sup>1</sup>

Prague 2005



Trust for Civil Society  
in Central & Eastern Europe  
Washington, D.C., USA



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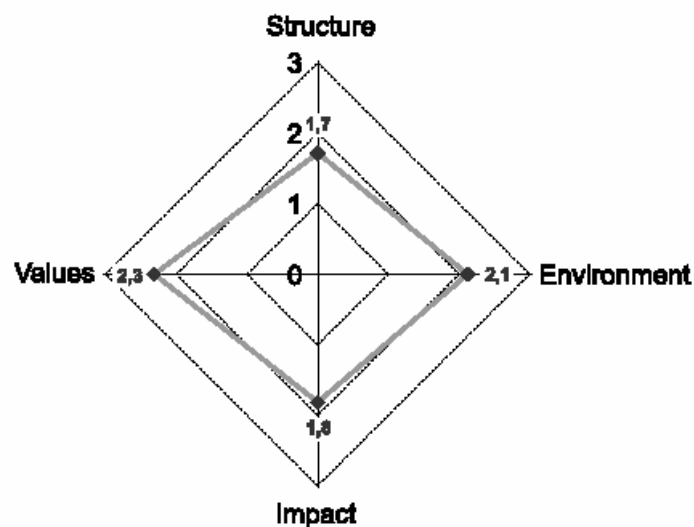
<sup>1</sup> An international action-research project coordinated by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation.

## » EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Czech civil society after 15 years of development: Active, ambitious, and diverse, but facing crucial challenges

This section presents the main findings, highlights and important implications of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) project in the Czech Republic, which was carried out by NROS in cooperation with the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University.

Over the course of 2004, the CSI project collected information and input from a broad range of civil society representatives, citizens, experts, and researchers on the state of civil society in the Czech Republic. The main data source was a representative surveys of the Czech population carried out by STEM, as well as regional survey, case studies, expert interviews and media monitoring. Drawing on this extensive data and using a comprehensive framework of 74 indicators, the project's National Advisory Group assessed the overall state of civil society in the country, which can be summarized in a visual graph (see Picture 1), the Civil Society Diamond. The diamond which emerged is rather well balanced in its four dimensions, i.e. structure, environment, values and impact, and is of moderately large size overall.



Picture 1: Civil Society Diamond for the Czech Republic

Czech civil society boasts many strengths, such as a relatively strong citizen base, successful role models in the form of environmental CSOs, a generally positive relationship with the state, and the positive values and practices of many CSOs. However, Czech civil society is not without its challenges. The study identified public accountability and internal management issues as two of the crucial issues for CSOs to address.

The CSI project brought to light many new insights, sometimes challenging existing wisdom on civil society in the Czech Republic. These highlights are briefly summarized below.

### **1. Setting the record straight on civic apathy**

It is time to do away with the myth about widespread apathy and a lack of civic engagement among Czech citizens. Forty seven percent of citizens made a material or financial donation to a CSO in the last year, while the same percentage of citizens is a member of a CSO. Notably, half of these participate in more than one organisation. Almost 60% of citizens take part in civic and social activities – such as work brigades, assistance to older citizens, or the organisation of cultural and sporting events – in their communities.

### **2. Czech civil society is active and diverse**

There are thousands of CSOs in the Czech Republic. The CSO types with the largest membership are sports organisations, followed by trade unions, beekeepers and similar organisations, and voluntary fire brigades. Apart from sports and recreational organisations with large memberships, there are also active and influential voluntary organisations that do not have significant membership. These are active, for example, in service provision to physically and mentally disabled or socially marginalised people, drug prevention, humanitarian aid, environmental protection, and consumer issues. Many of these organisations know how to bring marginalised issues onto the public agenda and how to effect positive social change, such as in the case of domestic violence or the care for terminally ill people.

### **3. The problem of umbrella organisations**

There are an estimated 80 CSO umbrella bodies in the Czech Republic. Most of these networks provide effective support to their member organisations and many umbrellas also play a positive role in developing codes of conduct and demanding compliance. However, other umbrella organisations do not boast a strong membership base and are not respected by other CSOs. Despite this, they act as representatives of the civil sector and as partners for the public administration. These activities are considered by many other CSOs as illegitimate.

### **4. Moving from uneven dialogue to real partnership**

A number of communication and dialogue mechanisms exist between the state and civil society, e.g. government and ministry advisory bodies, regional government commissions and committees, and tripartite structures. The media monitoring conducted as part of the project showed that the state mostly communicates with trade unions, and business and professional associations. Most other civil society actors do not enjoy the same status as respected and strong partners. The effective functioning of

the Government Council for Non-State Non-Profit Organisations is a positive development, as is the EU's partnership principle, whose application in the Czech Republic has begun to show its first positive results in terms of greater dialogue between the state and civil society.

#### **5. Private companies are mostly indifferent towards civil society**

Large companies know how to use the rhetoric of corporate social responsibility and have begun to portray their activities using this concept. However, this behaviour is sometimes regarded as self-promotion and PR. Whereas small firms are not aware of the notion of corporate social responsibility, they often behave responsibly in the communities where they operate, e.g. through supporting community activities. Cooperation between business and civil society is still rare. Consequently, according to two thirds of CSO representatives, the attitude of firms towards civil society activities is indifferent.

#### **6. Low trust and civil society**

Less than one fifth of Czech citizens agree with the statement that other people can be trusted, signifying low levels of interpersonal trust in Czech society. As a matter of comparison, the percentage of 'trusting' citizens in Germany is 40% and in Norway 65%. Low levels of trust, typical for many post-communist societies, represent something of a barrier to the development of civil society. However, it can be argued that, in the long run, strengthening civil society can also contribute to raising levels of trust in society at large. This optimistic perspective is supported by the fact that the level of trust is greater among members of CSOs than among non-members.

#### **7. Corruption in public administration is mirrored within civil society**

In recent years, Transparency International has consistently categorised the Czech Republic as a rather corrupt country, ranked as approximately the 50<sup>th</sup> least corrupt country in the world. Corruption is a societal problem, and therefore also affects civil society. Representatives of CSOs speak of the relatively common misuse of an organisation's influence for its own benefit and at the expense of other organisations, rather than of 'corruption' per se. This tendency may be exacerbated by the competition among CSOs for scarce resources and by the changing rules for grant schemes and for financing of CSOs.

#### **8. Two flagships of Czech civil society: environmental protection and social services**

Representatives of CSOs identified a particularly strong role for civil society in two specific fields: environmental protection and social service provision. Contrary to many other areas, such as human rights protection, anti-corruption initiatives, or unemployment, CSO representatives assessed both the activity and impact of CSOs working in these two fields very positively. Over the last decade, Czech environmentalists and ecologists have succeeded in becoming more than just nature conservationists. They have emerged as promoters of citizen rights and as monitors of public administration decisions and actions on environmental issues. CSOs working on social issues have managed to establish themselves as providers of much-needed social services.

For the first time for Czech civil society, a comprehensive and participatory assessment of civil society has been carried out through the CSI project. Its findings seek to contribute to charting the way for civil society's progress in the years to come. As the CSI study has found, the further development of civil society in the Czech Republic will require a focus on structural features, particularly the strengthening of networking, co-operation and communication within civil society. Another issue of concern is the relatively weak impact of civil society on government and society at large. Here, CSOs need to rise to the challenge of monitoring the state and corporate sector more effectively and extensively, and to invest in building greater trust by the general public.

It is hoped that the participatory and knowledge-based nature of the CSI project has laid the groundwork for specific initiatives by civil society and other stakeholders that may contribute to making Czech civil society even stronger and more sustainable in the future.