

# CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX

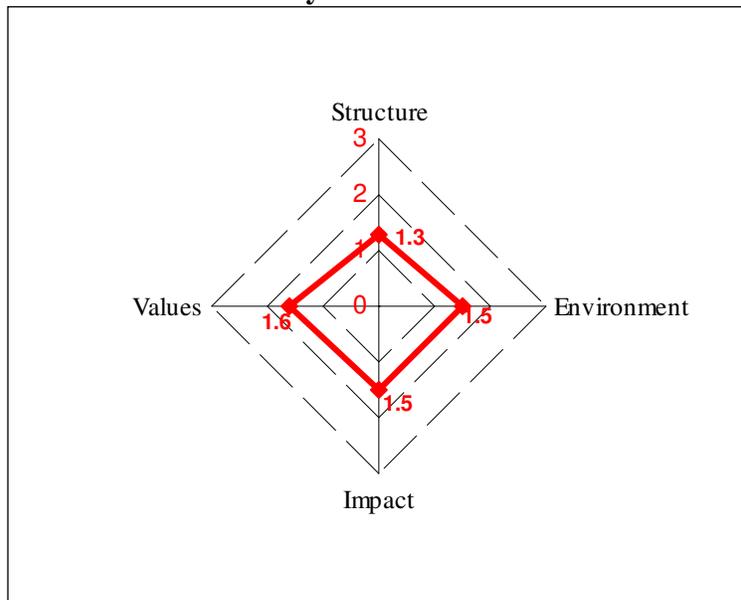
## SERBIA

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This section presents the main findings of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) project in Serbia, which was carried out by ARGUMENT and the Centre for the Development of Non-Profit Organizations (CDNPS).

Starting from the autumn of 2004 and during 2005 the CSI project collected information from a wide range of civil society stakeholders: citizens, civil society organisations (CSOs), experts and researchers. The main data sources were secondary data, a population survey, a regional stakeholder survey, policy case studies, interviews with key informants and media analysis. Using a comprehensive framework of 74 indicators and four dimensions, in addition to the wide range of data described above, the National Advisory Group assessed the overall state of civil society in Serbia, which is visually presented in the Civil Society Diamond (see figure 1 below).

**FIGURE 1: Civil Society Diamond for Serbia**



The diagram, visualising the state of civil society in Serbia the form of a Diamond, shows that civil society in Serbia is rather well balanced and of low to medium size. The structure dimension is slightly less developed and consequently includes a larger number of weaknesses than the other three dimensions.

Based on these empirical facts, the participatory CSI assessment exercise provided the first holistic empirical

database of civil society in Serbia, examining the main features of its development to date and its prospects for the future, but focusing most of all on its current status. These points are briefly summarized below.

### Civil Society Concept

Ever since the term civil society was revitalised – and re-emerged in public and expert discourse in Serbia, the concept of civil society has been considered as an entirely positive social force by the vast majority of actors and theoreticians, and any negative features are not classed as such. The CSI definition of civil society includes other types of association and citizen activities which, in Serbia, are not usually seen as part of civil society and fall rather into the categories of extremism, nationalism, racism or un-civil activities. Therefore, in most of the research, the team focused on organisations seen as positive in orientation while 'negative' CSOs have only been referred to at certain points throughout the report. Nonetheless, harmonisation of the national concept of civil society and the international instrument for measuring the development status and current status of civil society is deemed useful and operative for several reasons: (a) fine-tuning international methodological tools to the local concept/context ensures relevance to the local concept and more complete utilization, (b) it adds value to the country context/concept of civil society, (c) makes possible comparison of findings at the international level, (d) it stimulates further development of civil society within the country context, and (e) establishes a solid basis and comparable framework for further civil society surveys in the country and at the international level. Finally, the international methodology of the CSI, associated with the concept of civil society as understood by the national authors/actors should contribute to a better understanding of civil society's scope, role, significance and prospects.

### **Historical overview**

For the purpose of this research, the development of civil society in Serbia can be divided into four distinct phases: **(1)** in the period before the Second World War (1941) – in the late 19th and early 20th centuries civil society manifested itself in traditional forms of solidarity in rural communities. The Eastern Orthodox Church and the royal family played a significant role in the work of these organizations since many were established under their auspices. This is also the period when the term *non-governmental organization* was first used in Serbia in the journal *Public Voice*, published in 1874; **(2)** in the period after World War II (1945) – the communist regime, characterized by “governmental” *non-governmental organizations*, virtually erased freedom and the establishment of association was extremely restricted while all interest groups and associations of citizens focusing on recreation, sports and culture became part of the state-controlled system; **(3)** civil society reappeared in the late 80s and early 90s – in the period of formally proclaimed political plurality, the increased visibility of civil society was linked to the creation of a multi-party political system, with a number of civil initiatives, such as the Association for Yugoslavian Democratic Initiative which sought a democratic solution to the deep crisis in which the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia found itself at that time. In spite of a number of democratic initiatives, however, events led society in the opposite direction. This period was characterized by the break-up of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, armed conflict and a consequent influx of internally displaced persons and refugees. Increasing numbers of citizen groups and associations formed to oppose the language of hatred, to limit and then put an end to war and violence, to assist its victims, to protect elementary human rights, etc.; **(4)** in the period after 5 October 2000 – the series of demonstrations and campaigns against the wars and the regime, organized throughout the 1990s, mostly by national

CSOs, and NGOs in particular, reached its peak on 5 October 2000, when CSOs played an important role in ousting the authoritarian regime and installing a democratic political system. Suppressed and demonised by the regime during the 90s, since 2000 civil society has started to gain legitimacy, a recognized role and acknowledgement for its impact on governance processes and on key political and social issues.

## **The State of Civil Society in Serbia**

### **Structure**

The analysis of civil society's structure revealed that this is judged to be the weakest of the CSI dimensions. Focusing on the questions of size, composition, shape and contours, the CSI analysis revealed that this dimension is weak in terms of active participation, infrastructure, cohesion and resources. Although backed by significant amounts of international aid since the early 90s, civil society's structure appears to have lost some of its strength since 2000.

Comparing current membership to that of the 90s, it appears that civil society in Serbia has grown significantly with just under half of respondents to the CSI population survey (47%) claiming membership of at least one CSO (compared to 15% in 1996). However, though the number of citizens belonging to at least one CSO is three times greater and multiple membership is six times higher today, the level of citizen participation in non-partisan political actions has fallen significantly, particularly since October 2000. The data indicates that during the 1990s, in times of war, sanctions and an authoritarian regime 45% of the citizens took part in some of these activities, while the number of those active fell to almost half that (25%) after the regime was overthrown in October 2000. The most frequent forms of political action during the 90s were protests and demonstrations (39%) while the most frequent form nowadays is signing petitions (21%). Among the CSOs with the highest membership are trade unions (27%), political parties/movements (26.5%), NGOs and sports groups (both 19%) and tenants' associations (17%). A noticeably small number of citizens belong to environmental organizations – only 5%. Most CSOs do not have volunteers on a regular basis and volunteer work consists mainly of informal assistance to neighbours or family members. The public does not practice a culture of giving, since readiness for charitable is observable only in response to tragic events or under conditions of hardship. Charitable giving on a regular basis and in a systematic manner is still not exercised in Serbia, mostly due to the dire economic situation and the lack of trust among citizens. The perception of strong apathy and disengagement from civil society is widespread and people only participate in CSO activities rather superficially, even in cases when they are actually members of such organizations. Participation in collective community actions is also limited, with only a small minority attending meetings (17%) or participating in local community actions (21%).

Other specific areas of concern were identified, mainly: insufficient communication and cooperation among CSOs; lack of self-regulatory mechanisms on a sectoral basis and moderately efficient and regionally distributed support organisations. Communication within sectors is developed to some extent, but only within groups of organizations

involved in similar or neighbouring spheres, such as associations of persons with disabilities, ecological organizations, women's networks, association of judges, etc. Thus these groups act more like interest groups, which communicate amongst themselves (most often on an occasional and rarely on a regular basis) but seldom with external actors. Moreover, civil society actors cooperate irregularly on issues of common interest, and the number of active networks and coalitions is modest, even among those organizations working mainly at the local level. Networks and coalitions at national and regional level are very rare. The lack of cooperation among CSOs is a reflection of the fact they no longer have a "common enemy" (the regime of Slobodan Milošević) as they did in the 1990s, when they had to work together if they wanted to achieve their goals. The geographical distribution of CSOs exposes the marked urban character of these organizations. Correspondingly, the involvement of the rural population and the poor in membership and leadership of CSOs is very limited.

The major concern with regard to the structure dimension is the limited sources of finance available to CSOs. This stems from the fact that, among the NGOs in particular, the majority are strongly characterized by foreign donor dependency and international donors are phasing out their financial commitment to the country. As resources become scarcer, solidarity among CSOs is being replaced by competition. The general lack of stable financial resources is a severe obstacle to sustainability in the sector – which is underlined by the fact that in 2001, 31% of surveyed organisations assessed themselves as being in a good to excellent financial situation while this share had dropped to 15% in 2005. Human resources appear to be both a major strength and a major weakness for civil society in Serbia: the enthusiasm and dedication of highly qualified personnel in CSOs is seen as a major strength, while a high turn-over of professionals and the increasing discouragement of the majority of civil society activists are seen as their major weaknesses. The whole civil sector is believed to have become weaker as the best qualified and educated personnel move to more financially stable sectors. Therefore the future strengthening of civil society also depends on further investment in sustainable funding.

However, despite these weaknesses, according to the reflections of the NAG, it is important to note that civil society in Serbia is slowly becoming a locally-driven sector, the structure of which is likely to become more solid in the years to come, provided that it is more widely-supported.

## **Environment**

In analyzing political, social, economic, cultural and legal factors and the attitudes and behaviour of state and private sector actors towards civil society, the CSI study revealed that the environment dimension is developing moderately, although it still poses numerous challenges. The external environment in Serbia strongly suppressed civil society during the 1990s and it has also been somewhat limiting since 2000, with the exception of the short promising period under Prime Minister Đinđić (2000 – 2003). In general, the current situation in Serbia is one of weak political institutions and weak parliamentarianism with the concentration of all power in the hands of ruling political parties, a high degree of corruption and growing passivity in the attitude of the citizens

towards the authorities exercising power. Political reforms are centralised and there is lack of sequence and a harmonised approach to reform activities.

Currently, half-hearted implementation of laws and the lack of conducive legislative, political and socio-cultural environments in which CSOs can operate are major barriers to civil society development. In addition, two fundamental political conditions are missing; political room to manoeuvre and political culture.

Due to widespread corruption, the weak rule of law, dysfunctional institutions and the impoverishment of the population which is particularly severe among marginalised groups such as Roma, people with disabilities etc., mutual trust amongst citizens of Serbia has plummeted. The CSI study shows that distrust has been growing continually since 1996, and currently, the percentage of those who believe that the majority of their fellow citizens can be trusted has dropped to 9% according to the *Civil Society 2004* survey. At the local community level this is manifested in a decrease in the amount of collective action and the increased reluctance of individuals to engage in collective activities.

The CSI study showed that the relationship between civil society and the state is also problematic. There is not enough space for social and/or political dialogue between the state and civil society in Serbia. Social dialogue is very limited, while political confrontation is blocked by intolerance (although no longer by polarized ideologies) and the fight of political parties to win votes. In general, it can be concluded that the culture of dialogue is lacking in the political realm and the concept of dialogue is poorly understood in public discourse. Additionally, relations between the state and civil society are further undermined by the absence of a clearly demonstrated political will to recognize the role of civil society in the country's development. Civil society, on the other hand, with its large number of actors, still has not developed sufficient awareness of the character and political importance of its role in the wider community. Moreover, the state has a selective attitude towards CSOs. While it does not treat trade unions or employers' associations as important partners, it provides only modest financial support to organizations that are focused on the provision of social services and it does not recognise at all the watch dog function of CSOs. The state entertains positive relations with those CSOs that work on poverty reduction and regards sports and cultural clubs with affection, while ignoring, or sometimes even stigmatising, CSOs dealing with burning political issues such as the Hague tribunal defendants, facing up to the past and war crimes. Relations have deteriorated with the section of civil sector and the media which initiated discussions related to war crimes, particularly the massacre in Srebrenica, and mass graves. In the opinion of the European Commission this attitude shows the government's inability to comprehend the advocacy role of civil society and the media in a democratic society and it identifies a concerning tendency of political interference in media and NGO work. In this atmosphere, neither the trade unions nor the NGOs have come to fully realize their two most pressing roles: limit the negative impact of some current reforms and exercise damage control. Neither are they able to establish real social dialogue

CSOs receive modest funding from the state, mainly as a condition posed by international multilateral and bilateral donors. However, there are no clear guidelines to govern the

allocation of grants to CSOs and the process remains non-transparent. Informal links still dominate the relations between the state and civil society. Therefore, the establishment of an efficient CSO funding policy by the central state, in partnership with local authorities, which targets key policy issues, should be a priority.

The private sector does not regard civil society as either a partner or an important social actor, nor is it likely to recognize CSOs as recipients of corporate giving due to the lack of stimulating legislation. In general, the attitude of the private sector towards civil society is primarily *doubtful* (41%) or *indifferent* (36%). Local companies, especially in smaller places, occasionally assist CSOs, but this assistance is exclusively based on informal connections and relations.

Some optimistic features can be recognised in the fact that the legal framework and state-civil society relations are in an early phase of formation, and some visible progress was observed in relations between civil society and local authorities. Although the current context is not completely disabling, a wide range of different factors, ranging from political to economic and socio-cultural, are in need of improvement, if an enabling environment for civil society is to be established in Serbia.

## **Values**

In general, the score for the values dimension indicates that civil society in Serbia is promoting and practicing positive values in a rather moderate manner, except for the practice of gender equity within civil society, which has the strongest record. A major weakness of civil society in Serbia lies in the almost equally low scores given for *internal practice* and *external promotion* of all the values examined. This came as a surprise to civil society activists, both NAG members and participants of the National Workshop held on 8 of June 2006 in Belgrade. CSOs need to develop self-regulatory strategies in order to be able to use their own value practices as a key argument in the promotion of positive values externally.

The low score given to the practice and promotion of transparency is of particular concern, as the concept of transparency underpins most other norms and values, and is crucially important for the whole society. Establishing greater transparency as part of improved internal CSO management will foster CSOs ability to promote this concept in society at large. Until now values such as the fight against corruption, accountability and legitimacy have not been practiced effectively within CSOs, nor have they been upheld by the state or the private sector.

Another major weakness of civil society's values is the very limited role CSOs play in poverty eradication. This was another unexpected finding, particularly for those CSOs that are deeply involved in the poverty reduction process. Being relevant for policy makers and CSOs alike, this assessment not only points to the weakness of those CSOs involved in poverty eradication, but it also underscores the need to develop institutional strategies to incorporate CSOs more effectively into the existing national poverty eradication plans. So far, NGOs have not been perceived as strategic partners but rather as tools for the implementation of certain actions, although the first important step in this

direction has been made by establishment of the Social Innovation Fund (SIF is a transitory mechanism designed by the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Policy of Serbia) aimed, among other things, to create value for social investment by providing incentives for innovation, quality and NGO government partnership.

CSI participants, particularly those closely involved in the poverty reduction process since the drafting of the Poverty Reduction Strategy, appeared to lack awareness of the fact that their activities on poverty eradication (however intensive, useful or influential they might be) have not been detected by the majority of other CSOs, or registered by the media and the wider public. This is a general problem faced by most NGOs, particularly when it comes to the effectiveness of their activities. Both the NAG and the National Workshop participants see dealing with the low visibility of anti-poverty activities as one of the top priorities for CSOs in Serbia. As the CSI study revealed, the role of civil society in poverty eradication is not yet broadly recognized or acknowledged in spite of the fact that NGOs are equipped to provide services (e.g. social, education, health) especially those tailor-made to the particular needs of vulnerable groups and those which are smoothly fostering the integration of the most vulnerable into mainstream society, making it possible for them to benefit from the opportunities available to the majority of citizens.

Finally, the study revealed the dedication of civil society to other social values, such as non-violence, tolerance, environmental awareness and poverty eradication. Yet, it also indicated the need for the further development of certain values, such as transparency and external promotion of democracy, which, in the opinion of NAG members, have been continuously deteriorating in a number of CSO activities since 2000.

## **Impact**

As a consequence of its rather weak structure and the limitations of the environment, civil society in Serbia has had quite a limited impact on governance and development issues so far. Key obstacles to a more sustained policy impact are the lack of advocacy and lobbying skills among professional CSO staff. Moreover, due to the widespread mistrust prevailing in the society, CSOs have a very limited role in fostering growth of social capital amongst their membership base. It can therefore be concluded that they contribute only slightly to improving social capital among the population.

The question of the extent to which the low level of public trust is a consequence of the low ratings for civil society's transparency was explored at some regional stakeholder consultations. Participants agreed that such a connection might exist, but they also added that other factors, such as the limited work done by CSOs to present and promote their work to the public and the negative media image of some human rights NGOs (as part of the heritage from the previous regime and ongoing intermittent attacks in some media against NGOs dealing with key political issues) also contributed to rather disappointing ratings for civil society among citizens.

In general, as the Regional Stakeholder survey revealed, the effort and input invested by civil society are far greater than the actual impact achieved. This holds particularly true

for civil society's anti-corruption efforts which, according to the research results, have enjoyed a very limited impact compared to the inputs invested. In the area of human rights advocacy the difference between the effort invested and the influence achieved is less drastic, while on the problem of poverty, the impact achieved by CSOs is minimal compared to efforts they have made.

Regarding the influence of CSOs on public policy in general, the consulted experts identified some progress, saying that the state is becoming more ready to engage with civil society which, in their opinion, is resulting in an increasing number of invitations to civil society representatives to participate in working groups, to submit their own reports on certain issues, to submit their reflections and suggestions on certain laws, etc. and their appointment to various councils. However, some experts consider such commitment and practice to be mostly donor driven and primarily cosmetic since, they say, most government officials are still not interested in providing a genuine space for civil society to take part in the policy making process.

When reviewing the subdimension scores, some differences become apparent. Whereas civil society's functions of empowering citizens and meeting societal needs were judged to be moderately well developed, its role as a watchdog of the state and private sector is still seen as weak. While there are already signs that CSOs in Serbia are starting to play a role in holding the state to account, the monitoring of the corporate sector is still in its initial stages. Social corporate responsibility is a new issue though, for CSOs as well as for the private sector in Serbia, particularly for local corporations.

The role of CSOs in meeting societal needs focuses mostly on the needs of marginal groups, as the state is assigned a dominant role in the welfare system. Given that Serbian society is increasingly becoming fragmented and new social groups (such as people who lost their jobs a couple of years before attaining the right to retirement, displaced persons and refugees, etc.) are likely to become marginalised, a number of key informants shared the opinion that it is essential for CSOs to play a more proactive role in addressing social issues within Serbian society.

## **Recommendations**

In order to utilize the CSI assessment to generate action-oriented recommendations, a national workshop of around 80 participants was held at the end of the project. Specific recommendations were identified and grouped into three categories: (1) recommendations to CSOs themselves, (2) recommendations to both civil society and the state and (3) recommendations to other relevant stakeholders.

### **(1) Recommendations for civil society encompassed the following, among others:**

- **Work on improving the public image of CSOs.** Encourage cooperation with the media, which would promote good examples of CSO achievements. Work on promoting transparency regarding sources of funding, financial operations, methods of conducting business and decision-making as examples of good practice. Promote the results of previous work to a wider public since a lot has been done and good results have been achieved, but distrust among citizens in

CSOs is still present and the influence of the work performed is seen as insignificant. The precondition for improving the public image of CSOs is the establishment of mechanisms for the regulation of relations within civil society.

- **Lobbying.** Develop mechanisms to lobby for the enactment of draft laws prepared by CSOs as well as inclusion of CSOs in local and national budget drafting processes. Keep up current contacts with representatives of political parties, and National and City Assembly representatives in order to influence specific legislation or improve the position of CSO target groups.
- **Insure stable CSO funding.** Focus on obtaining funds from public budgets, at national or municipal level. This can be achieved by making partnerships with local authorities and conducting joint projects, or by lobbying for legislation which would provide increased financial resources for CSO funding by increasing budget funds designed for CSOs in national or local budgets.
- **Work on ensuring continuity of operations.** Focus on organization sustainability by providing stable sources of funding. Work on creating stronger infrastructural support for newly formed CSOs such as databases, resource centres, educational centres, and infrastructural support. Ongoing education of CSO personnel is necessary to ensure the quality level of activities and services. Develop mechanisms to prevent CSO personnel from leaving the sector, especially experienced and well-educated staff.

## **(2) Recommendations for civil society and the state:**

- **Promote mutual cooperation** between the state institutions, local governments and representatives of civil society.
- **Legal Framework.** Specific CSO activity should be devoted to ensuring the enactment of an appropriate legal and fiscal framework for CSO activities. CSO representatives can comment on proposed draft laws on NGOs and ensure an adequate legal framework for the functioning of civil society.
- **Make available sustainable funds for CSOs.** Work on the creation of a program budget at national and local level devoted to funding of CSO activities. This strategic measure would ensure that CSOs get a larger amount of funds from the public budget. In that way CSOs would have a more stable and more certain source of income thus ensuring the continuity of their work. The dependency on foreign donors would thus be significantly reduced.

## **(3) Recommendations for other relevant participants:**

- **Exchange knowledge with other relevant participants.** This could be done by exchanging expert knowledge from different areas, by associating experts from civil society, public institutions, and the private sector on similar issues. Involve experts, particularly from the private sector, in the work of CSOs through education and exchange of experience. This measure is seen as a good mechanism for building the capacities of CSOs in order to sustain their activities.

## **Conclusion**

There are several indications that civil society in Serbia is currently negotiating treacherous ground: unable to move forward due to constraints in its operating

environment and internal limiting factors such as a high turn-over of professionals and the increasing discouragement of the majority of civil society activists, and faced with the serious problem of shrinking financial resources. The interest of local entrepreneurs and local government in cooperating with civil society initiatives is generally inhibited by the lack of a stimulative legislative framework and by debilitating (inherited) habits that favour informal connections, rather than formalized cooperation. In general, the CSI findings indicate that further sustainable development of civil society in Serbia is by no means inevitable, and will require serious attention. Sixteen years after the collapse of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, civil society is still at the beginning of the process of building institutionalised partnerships with other stakeholders in the country.

On a more positive note, it is clear that space for dialogue between stakeholders is being opened up, though this development is far more evident and promising at the local than at the national level where such relations are still weak and sporadic. As a result, there are realistic prospects for the development of a strong, locally grounded civil society; one that will work in partnership with local governments and local businesses, a development which would signify a major achievement and bodes well for long-term sustainability.