

Transforming Post-Communist Countries' Welfare System:

The Role Of The State And The Civil Society¹

Dr. Elka Todorova

The aim of this paper is to point to the main group of questions which could help to develop the notion of the interrelated roles of the state and civil society in building new welfare institutions in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The assessment of the economic reforms and the transformation of the social institutions is approached by analysis of the state's and civil society's role in the process of transition. Important differences between countries in CEE are revealed such as the type of economic reforms and level of development of social institutions as main explanatory mechanisms why certain elements of the civil society are more difficult to establish in some countries than in others.

The danger of underestimating the importance of the state in the development of social services in post-communist countries goes hand in hand with the vague and unclear vision of the shape of civil society and its objectives. The undervaluing of the state's role is caused by its greatly diminished legitimacy, lack of resources and the exclusive support for non-governmental structures in their formal existence as NGOs.

The state and organizations of civil society need to form an *interactive* and *complementary* relationship in the aim to enhance welfare. It is argued that communitarianism and investments in informal networks are two ways to strengthen the social capital development in societies, which have strong communitarian traditions.

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I. Economic Reform and Social Institutions

The idea that the success of market economy reforms may depend strongly on the existence and effective work of non-market institutions is a relatively new challenge to the social scientific thinking. Its proponents already have given solid arguments in favor of the interrelated development of social institutions and economic reforms.³ For a transformation in the economic sphere to be successful stable social institutions should support the effect of the economic reforms, which according to Dani Rodrik (1999, 5) are: the property right's institution, the regulatory institutions, the institutions for macroeconomic stabilization, the institutions for social insurance and the institutions of conflict management.

It is expected further, clashes such as wars, famines or great political swerves (like the Fall of the Berlin Wall), to incite big institutional changes. And indeed, all Eastern European countries after 1990 started market economic reforms accompanied by large institutional changes, or more precisely the building or rebuilding of new social and political institutions took place in the course of the transformation of state property and the introduction of new fiscal and monetary reforms.

Naturally, in most of the cases (considering information for Bulgaria, Romania, Albania and Macedonia)⁴ the macroeconomic transformation was followed by chaotic reforms in the non-economic spheres, ending up with quasi-reformed legal, regulatory and political systems. Some data reports them to be stable, such as the relatively high indicator on political stability for Bulgaria (0.434), compared to Brazil (0.3), calculated

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³ See among others: Kaufmann, Kraay, Zoido-Lobaton (1999); Morduch (1999); Rodrik(1999); Woolcock (1998).

⁴ See Valerie Bunce, "The Political Economy of Postsocialism" for a very good analysis on the different reform outcomes in CEEC.

by Kaufmann, Kraay and Zoido-Lobaton in their 1999 *Governance Matters* analyses. But the non-economic institutions in most of the Eastern European countries lack the traditional meaning of stability and predictability, which attracts foreign interest and investment. The generally acknowledged negative features of the overall reforms are absence of control, lack of transparency and low level of accountability which manifest themselves in the flourishing of the so called *second* or *shadow* economy, or in the formation of what is known as the “rainbow-colored” economic system (Katsenelinboigen, 1978).

Data shows that in some cases, the shadow economy is three times larger than the official economy (a typical example being the ex-Soviet state Kirgizistan). Overall, the share of the shadow economy is continually augmenting and within the time period from 1991 to 1997 when the last sample of data is analyzed, it is almost doubled (from around 25 % to around 45 %)⁵. Generally, the criminal economy in modern economies is stronger than the shadow economy. In the Eastern European post-communist countries it is the opposite – the shadow economy is far more developed than the criminal economy. Furthermore, it takes advantage of the semi-closed information channels and is using the latter for certain business deals.

The three primary “colors” of the rainbow system are the official economy, which relies on legal and large-scale formal organizations; the uncivil economy, in which individuals earn income by breaking rules of law in the allocation of goods and services; and the social (capital) economy, in which goods and services are produced within households and informal networks (with no money transactions).

We may identify many reasons to explain the bad economic and social results of the transformation process in the post-communist countries. Corruption is one of the most evident but two other factors that seem to be equally responsible for the overall bad performance are the shadow, or uncivil economy and the abandonment of support system, which otherwise could guarantee safety nets for the groups in risk

To give an example, all ideologically different governments in Bulgaria (we have had eight since the political changes in 1989) were reluctant to elaborate talks about

⁵ See Kaufmann et al.’s data on the Aggregate Governance Indicators.

social security issues or safety nets, fearing the interpretation of return to the communist past and socialist thinking.

There is a wide spread view that the overall underestimation of the need to develop an effective social welfare system was the result of the financial problems and strive for budget equilibrium of the governments which were elected democratically. Unfortunately, this does not explain why in Bulgaria no attempts were made to build temporary safety nets mechanisms to provide backing to the reforms. An interesting, plausible explanation for me would be that there was no clear understanding of the interrelations between the new democratic state and the newly emerged elements of civil society, especially regarding their mission, vision and organizational capacities to provide security and safety.

II. The State And Civil Society In Transition

The classical political philosophy presents a long history of writings about the nature of both the state and civil society. The analysis of the latter is especially associated with the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859). More recently there has been a steady stream of writings on this subject including the works of Hall (1995) on the theory and history of civil society and Keane (1998) on the civil society's interrelations with the state.

Hall cautions against an over-optimistic and uncritical view of what civil society and its organizations can achieve in post-communist states. He sees civil society as both a value and a set of social institutions and is not in favor of a view of civil society as societal self-organization against the state. The widely held opinion that strong and autonomous groups comprising civil society should balance the state is a incorrect suggestion because it sees the state exclusively as a threat. This applies particularly to countries with weak civil societal traditions, where the belief that civil society would work best in the absence of the state is heard more often. Hall argues that basically “the state is necessary for civil society for protection and to ensure basic social conditions”(p.16).

Strength and stability are not given to the state detached from the key groups of society, sitting autonomously above the needs of the society. Civil society and the state need to interact continuously. The state gains from the work of a civil society that recognizes its institutional structure, and the civil society flourishes in a position of control. Hall describes this relationship as one of a “reciprocal consent”.

What is the situation in societies undergoing transition? Most of the governments ruling the countries in Eastern Europe during the last decade more or less openly rejected the role of the state to care for the vulnerable groups suffering from the transformation reforms to democracy and market economy, to build what is called safety nets. At the beginning of the transformation, people were sharing the illusion that the state would be more responsible and responsive than the old-style state to humanitarian problems. Soon the nature of the reforms even in the less liberal approaches disillusioned them and no wonder the will of strong authoritarian governance which would bring order and would create, regulate and improve welfare became evident. At a time when most developed countries have preserved the necessary key role of the state and community in public services such as social insurance, social assistance, education, training and health, in Eastern European countries with low welfare such as Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria there is a trend to ignore the role of the state and community ⁶.

Most of the countries undergoing transition face enormous economic and social problems. Some researchers refer to these problems as the price for establishing civil society during the transition to democracy. Others focus on the difficulties of transforming the state governed economy to an economy of market relations. Still others point out to the cost of building new nations, in the cases of ex-Yugoslavia and ex-Soviet states. Hall identifies factors determining which countries are most likely to establish strong civil societies. He establishes several groups. Among them are those that broke firmly with the communist past; are physically close to the European Union; have civil traditions and histories of self-organization; and have already undertaken basic nation-building. Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Estonia, Slovenia are examples of countries

⁶ Wesolowski (1995); Munday (1998); Todorova (1999) are but some of the many who highlight this tendency.

most likely to establish strong civil societies. For states like Bulgaria the establishing of civil society is seen still as a demanding task.

Bunce (1999) recognizes another reason for the unequal pace and success of the economic and democratic development in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, namely “the outcome of the first competitive elections” (p.769). The author states that “the economic reforms are far more likely when the non-communist opposition forces triumph and far less likely when the ex-communists succeed in maintaining political power (p.768) [since] the best predictor of democratization is economic reform” (p.782). Three groups of countries were compared according to their economic performance in the last ten years. The first is the group of countries which had shown positive results, i.e. certain economic growth, by imposing “shock therapy” (Hungary, Poland). The second includes countries which sustained from reforming their institutions and economy (Belarus, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan) and the third is the group of countries which fall in between (Bulgaria, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine). The last group, according to the author’s reasoning, exhibit the poorest economic performance because those countries lack the pace, euphoria and adventure of the change (typical for the first group) or the relative order and patience of preserving the status quo (characteristic of the second groups). The third group is defined as the groups of the “no-where” transition.

The theme of the differences between post-communist countries in the establishment of democratic reforms and building of civil society is also considered by Kuti (1999). She refers to three groups. First are countries such as Belarus and Russia, which threatened every freedom of association and the existence of a not-for-profit sector; next comes a large group in the Balkans and former Soviet republics which is very dependent on foreign aid and highly vulnerable to reduced foreign funding, where the need to build up indigenous NGOs is high; finally, the third group represents the most developed region (the Visegrad countries), where the main problems are similar to those in the developed countries.

Following the reasoning of the same author, the differential growth of the third sector in post-communist countries is reflecting the governments’ intentions to privatize large parts of public services and transform state welfare systems. In mixed economies the funding of civil society social welfare initiatives is usually concentrated in NGOs

which substitute the state in some public services provisions. Kuti observes that in the post-communist countries the principles of subsidiarity and the “arms length” are not rooted in the political culture but are imported into the political vocabulary that fits the new ideology. Thus, they often are excluded from the behavioral patterns of the governments. For this reason, informal social networks continue to play very important part in the distribution of public funds, with state services lobbying strongly against contracting out the public services.

Sakwa (1999) on the other hand points to the fact that old systems had prevented the growth of any social group able to carry through the democratization process. Therefore, they couldn't be trusted as organizers of the transformation process and carriers of broader social projects. In the words of the author “... in the post-communist era a distinct Tocquevillian approach is adopted focusing on the need for strong independent associations to stand between the state and the individual. This has been a two-edged process, allowing on the one side the emergence of civil associations, entrepreneurial relations, philanthropy, organized religion, media diversity and so on, but, on the other, the luxuriant flourishing of social morbidities, crime, corruption, poverty, drastic inequality, racism and ethnic conflict. Both processes represent in different forms the revenge of society on the state”. (pp. 54-55). The author further defines the establishment of civil society that has preceded democracy as an outcome of social development and antecedent cultural evolution as a “giant bootstrapping operation in which decisions on what is desirable precede the cultural and institutional matrix that can sustain the choice” (p.57).

According to Sakwa (p.119), there are four essential elements of the post-communist transition: an overcoming of the past; an accelerated period of change before normal evolutionary development is restored; a relatively homogeneous pattern of change between countries; and an assumption that there is a known end point. This last element is the most outstanding, because it leads to questioning the accuracy of the term *transition* which assumes a known end state as the destination, rather than *transformation* in which only the point of departure is known. Then the question to be answered is whether the end state is the transformed role of the state, sharing responsibilities with the

other two sectors, i.e. the balanced three-sectored state or the prevalence of any of the sectors over the two others?

The third sector being totally new for all former communist countries at the start of the changes, has gradually developed. Still it hadn't reached the position to become a substitute for the state in delivering social services. I defend the idea that the state should have leading role in the creation and development of this sector. My personal arguments are that if a successful building of civil society institutions is to be expected, this would require a top-down instead of a bottom-up process, strongly supported by governments. The arguments for this seemingly incorrect statement are that in the absence of a second influential actor to stimulate the formation of new institutions (strong citizen's associations), it is more effective for societies to decentralize the old social services and to invest in their "communization". To give an example, public services should be registered not on the grounds of abstract short-termed objectives but as a substitute to the community or state institutions. They should cover the deficiencies of the existing agencies and become their counterpart. Only then will the third sector be able to gain enough strength to develop networks and play significant role. What is typically seen in countries such as Bulgaria though, is that governments are either preoccupied with preserving the sole role of the state in social services (even if they are unable to afford an adequate management and financing), or decline initiatives of the third sector to work jointly. Consequently, distrust and disengagement are provoked, which in turn prevent the formation of the aimed environment of "high individual responsibility".

In Western European countries the state has adopted a more "back seat" role of facilitator, funding agent and manager, while the non-governmental sector has acquired an increasingly prominent role as provider of the main social services. But the state funding for social policy remains essential and the type of contracting of the services shapes and structures the relationship between the state and the non-state sectors. There should be overall understanding and consent over the heavy scale of the task facing post-communist countries in developing democratic, widely accepted and sustainable systems for social care. The development of the successful mechanisms of the "how process", the technology of the state and civil society's complementarity's role play in key areas of public life, is left to the skill of balancing.

III. Democracy, Civil Society and Social Care

The definition most relevant to the issues of the paper is Rodrik's (1999) definition of democracy as a "meta-institution for building good institutions"(p.3). It is relevant since the author specially outlines the social insurance among the constellation of good institutions. According to him democracies compared to autocracies perform better at managing shocks, produce less randomness and volatility, and acquire more desirable distributional outcomes.

De Tocqueville's definition of civil society as "free associations that exist as intermediate institutions between citizens and the state, and in which citizens can realize their social freedom and equality" stresses the fact that citizens come together in a rich variety of associations to contribute towards meeting their own and their fellow citizens' social needs.

If social stability and lack of social conflicts, as well as social cohesion and absence of social distortion are seen as securing economic growth, then the question of the relations between the state and the third sector⁷ in the social care development in post-communist countries should be of special interest.

In a comparative study of the social care systems of 10 countries under Communism (Munday & Lane, 1998) with the emerging systems during the prolonged period of transition, it was demonstrated that there has been a steady growth in the contribution of civil society's organizations to social welfare. Furthermore, the role of the state at its different levels is often very uncertain and problematic. The third sector had shown better results than might have been expected given its short historical development. The general conclusion, which was drawn from the study stated that effective and coordinated contributions are required from *both* sectors if adequate social welfare systems are to be established and endured in most post-communist countries undergoing transition.

⁷ The latter generally include NGOs, CIOs and informal networks.

Within the broad field of social welfare the so called *social care* system refers to services provided by social workers and other professional groups for user groups such as elderly people, children and families, and people with disabilities. These services may be provided in residential homes or institutions, in day care centers, in users' own homes. Social services may be provided by state agencies, not-for-profit (NGOs) and for-profit agencies, and very important for us, informally they are also provided by family, friends, neighbors and the community, i.e. they depend on the existing social capital.

Post-communist countries in Eastern Europe face a very difficult task in establishing and maintaining adequate social care systems for some general but also country-specific reasons. Among the general reasons the most important are:

1. The legacy of the past, which provided limited, mostly institutional state care and repressed any types of civil society associations even those providing social help.
2. Substantial increase in social problems and need for social care post-1989, with widespread unemployment resulting in consequences such as family poverty and stress related illnesses.
3. Growing economic and fiscal problems for governments due to the huge costs of restructuring, the low tax returns, and above all the power of the shadow economy.
4. Loss of important social care services previously provided by enterprises (housing facilities, child care, clubs of pensioners, etc.).

We would expect governments in this situation to become heavily dependent on agencies of civil society for social care provision. In practice we see the opposite. The more Central than Eastern European the countries are, the more not-for-profit agencies for serving social problems were registered. Although we hear that this division is the result of a East vs. West model of attitudes which dominate the belief systems in the respectful countries (and give Central Europeans the value of Western Europeans in thought), we argue that the splitting up is first of all a matter of financial support since most of the NGOs registered after the changes in CEEC depend heavily on outside international agencies for funding.

State support initiatives at the end not only tend to be limited for financial reasons, but they further are trapped by the unwillingness of public administrators to relate to the non-governmental sector. In certain cases there is a tendentious ignorance of

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the operational capacities and missions of NGOs designed to serve social needs, inspired by the unspoken competition between the “national” public sector and the “internationally” dependent NGOs. Consequently in countries such as Bulgaria, Albania, Russia, Rumania⁸ neither state nor non-governmental safety nets were built in time, thus preventing the foundation of a system which could serve the longer-term development of welfare. At the same time, it should be mentioned that the short-termed and uncertain international funding hampered the development of a sustainable network of NGOs. Therefore, social protection was left to be a private matter, following the understanding of 19th century model of charity and sub-standard safety net state provision.

For post-communist countries, which didn't develop a strong third sector the present and future role of the state in social care became crucial. International experience drew conclusion that the role of state under the circumstances had to be preserved for the aim of succeeding in the reformation of the social sphere⁹. To reach the international trend to reduce substantially its role as a service provider, the state first has to fulfill its duty as an essential agent to perform social care. This includes backing up the economic and social costs by providing a modern safety net system.

It seems that in the Eastern group of the post-communist countries, the states had failed to fulfill its role of welfare provider and the civil sector has not reached maturity that could allow it to become important substitute of the state for social service delivery. An interesting question would be to analyze the situation of the informal sector - whether it had gained more power to compensate for the failures of the state and the formal civil sector in providing care and safety.

The analysis of the informal civil relations is usually done with the help of two prevailing notions, namely the idea of communitarism and the concept of social capital (which often are used as substitutes). The former has proposed to fill the ideological

⁸ At a time when The Peace Corps was establishing relations with the newly elected democratic governments in Eastern Europe, the Rumania government signed a contract for help in the field of social work and building NGOs in the social sector; in contrast, the Bulgarian government asked for help in developing business centers.

⁹ These are the basic conclusions of the papers presenting the situation of the changing social care systems in CEEC, see Munday (1998).

vacuum between the individualist and collectivist approaches¹⁰; the latter is said to develop informal networks characterized by trust, safety, easier flow of information and group decision making. Social relationships which stimulate participatory development, social inclusion, building of assets and bottom-up development are considered a “capital”, which could influence the democratization process and economic growth.

One of the main factors affecting the stability and effectiveness of social ties is the active approach of citizens to engage in voluntary work in their communities. The premise is that communities which have traditions in building supportive, helpful, solidarity based relations, which stimulate voluntary work for neighborhood needs and encourage political activity, would develop qualitative management, social trust and mutual organization of interests, i.e. would nourish the human networks and would develop as social capital.

The central aim of communitarianism as it follows from the word is building communities, which rely no longer solely on the state, but include the “capital” of the relations with the business and the non-formal associations. The approach of communitarianism is amalgamating the responsibility to the state, the community and the important community organizations through broadening the participation, inclusion of all possible agents and empowerment of all risky groups and vulnerable individuals. According Munday, “communitarianism claims to provide a philosophical framework for working out the future relationship of the state, the third sector with its not-for-profit and for-profit sectors in modern societies that reject the ideological stances of both state collectivism and free-market individualism” (p.7). The premise of having civil society is the existence of communities which encourage social capital development.

Most social-capital theorists define social capital as a human endeavor independent of the culture, which has the ability to produce individual and group effects in different situation and is opposed to social exclusion. Richard Rose (2000) developed

¹⁰ Some social psychologists such as Harry Triandis (1996) argue that individualism and collectivism are just two different strategies for personal or group behavior, whose effect depends solely on the social context, more than on anything else. By dismantling them from the ideological cover of the cold war these notions, according to the author, have lost their political and ideological connotations and now represent solely two different choice- strategies, whose success depends on the situational context.

the notion that in countries such as Russia, where formal organizations do not conform neither to rationality (in the Weberian sense) nor to democracy (in Putnam's understanding), social capital networks achieve different meaning and peculiar significance. The author distinguishes a classic neo-liberal economic paradigm which emphasizes the individual income as the primary determinant of welfare, and stimulates the so called modern use of networks to pursue welfare; a use of pre-modern networks, based on exchanging help with friends and neighbors (widely spread in Soviet time); and finally, an anti-modern networks system, based on corruption of public officials and coercion of others outside the law. "In default of institutions of the state, the network to which most Russians turn is more likely to be anti-modern than official" (p.50) states the author. The reason for this, Rose sees in the fact that in Russia, as in most other third wave democracies, free elections are introduced before establishing the institutions of the modern state, while in the "first-wave democracies, the rule of law, civil society institutions, and the accountability of governors was established before the introduction of free elections with universal suffrage" (p.53).

Alternatively, Wesolowski (1995) sustains the view that communitarianism represents a positive trend for the development of civil society in Poland. He argues that communitarianism overcomes the deficit in intermediate groups that link society and state organizations and at the same time secure the legitimacy of the state.

It is interesting to note that in Bulgaria (and Macedonia) the territorial community historically has played the role of a quasi-political institution, which had mediated the power of the state to the citizens. Communities had always been more influential than families.. The kin ethos (which even now is very powerful) has clear prescriptions that every member in need should be given help without expecting reciprocity and that she will be the kin's object of philanthropy and personal sacrifice until she is strong enough to take care of himself. The community is using its power of controlling whether widowed, divorced, orphans, and old people are in temporary or permanent need for protection and are taken good care by their families.

Philanthropy in Bulgaria has never been a private matter, and instead is regulated by the community. To give only one example, in 1930 there were two times more educational organizations funded by communities (around 4500) than professional, trade

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or other formal NGO organizations/associations.¹¹ The political changes in Bulgaria marked a raise in the registering NGOs. The overall evaluation of their effectiveness though is questionable.

One of the reasons for their low ability to yield positive social changes is their somewhat artificial base of formation, because most of them replicate Western associations of groups of interest and not traditional communitarian networks. As a consequence, most Bulgarian NGOs are not only financially poor, small and powerless, but often are perceived by the population as foreign invention or elitist's experiments. A century ago, at the beginning of the 20-th Century, almost all state engagements and juridical acts in the social sphere were initiated by movements and activities of the community organizations. Communities in Bulgaria first opened the discussions about social problems in public; engaged political agents in their committees and councils and finally worked and helped the preparation of normative documents.

In conclusion, to establish a fruitful relation between the democratic state, the civil society and the welfare system in Bulgaria and in other Central and Eastern European countries, there should be clear understanding of the inherently existing societal resources which could serve as social capital in times of insecure. It is their discovery that will guarantee the successful transition.

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¹¹ These include not only school organizations but libraries, cultural centers, town museums and places for extra-school training of pupils.

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