

Voluntary service is on the increase. Active civil society is growing. The link with Europe, which is also cultural, seems complete. From the end of the Communist regime until today, the Czech Republic has

# Remarkable years for the Czech Republic

CIVIL SOCIETY 1

by Vittorino Ferla

undergone significant changes, as stated by the Civil Society Index. However, some shadows remain: the backwardness of non-profit management and the still pervasive presence of the State.

**T**he adjective “apathetic” was used for many years to define citizens from ex-Communist countries. The reason for this probably lies in the overbearing regime and its claim to meet every need; maybe it’s because this was the only way to survive in times of dictatorship. The report on civil society in the Czech Republic, issued within the framework of the Civil Society Index (see box) and promoted by the international network Civicus, seems to refute this traditional picture.

As a matter of fact, it emerges that in the last five years, activism among Czech citizens has increased considerably. At least half of them are members of a civil society organization (in 2001 this value was 29%). Favorite memberships included those of sport organizations (16%) and trade unions (13%), followed by farmers’ associations (6%), volunteer firefighters (6%), religious groups (6%) and fishermen’s organizations (5%). Almost half of all Czech citizens were involved in political activities outside political parties through the signing of petitions, sending letters to newspapers, participating in public demonstrations and making donations to non-profit organizations. On average the Czechs are

willing to donate 1.4% of their annual income. The percentage of donors obviously increases amongst people with better education and high social standing. The “good causes” that attract most contributions concern children (49%), the disabled (35%) and the victims of natural catastrophes (24%).

Many are also those engaged in very concrete activities of general interest. One Czech out of three has done voluntary work in the last year. In most cases these are activities performed in the local municipalities, which have an important role in the Czech Republic. There has been an increase in the number of promoters, volunteers and organizers involved in social and sport events, environmental protection, the safeguard of historical monuments, activities for children, assistance to the elderly, the diseased and the socially weak, in educational and cultural institutes. The survey reveals that approximately 6 Czechs out of 10 have taken part in at least one of these activities, for an average of 79 hours a year (equal to 6.5 hours a month), in addition to normal working and family duties. These volunteers share enthusiasm and skills that are very “useful for the



cause” to the point that the survey considers human resources to be one of the main strengths of the organizations in Czech civil society. Along with internal differentiation, this allows them to perform a wide range of activities and to tackle a myriad of issues, by working with various target groups.

But in which sector is civic activism most popular? Which are the most interesting scenarios? As Teresa Vajdová, researcher at the Civil Society Development Foundation of Prague and responsible for the survey, explains, “environmentalist organizations played a decisive role in the Czech Republic even before 1989, when they helped lay the foundations of the ‘underground’ revolution. These days the conservation of nature continues to represent a very strong value for the country”. And that is not all. “Since the beginning of the ‘90s”,

continues Mrs. Vajdová, “environmentalists have performed lobbying activities to influence the legislative power, and have stimulated the public debate with the aim of involving citizens in decision-making processes. These days, environmentalist organizations are the only groups in Czech civil society able to monitor the behavior of the government and corporations”. Mrs. Vajdová added that groups engaged in social services and the protection of the weak, such as the disabled and the terminally ill, are also very good at defining the agenda of the most important public issues.

These are the positive aspects of a civil society that is slowly re-emerging from the dark years of the regime and is trying to catch up with other European countries. However, two major obstacles remain which hinder the full assertion of Czech



civil citizenship.

In the first place, the limitations of management in leading groups. Lack of professionalism, managers of poor quality, limited financial resources and the very modest role played by “umbrella organizations” daily endanger the success of the work performed by these organizations. This is coupled with scant ability to present their activities, to communicate inside and outside their own environment and to mobilize and activate other citizens. As the report states: “Consequently, the civil society organizations are often unable to exploit the existing opportunities and play a role in the public arena, and have a limited impact on the external environment”. It is not coincidental that new corporate social responsibility practices are difficult to introduce.

## HOW THE INDEX WORKS

*The Civil Society Index (CSI) is an action-research project developed by national civic organizations with the aim of assessing the state of civil society in 63 countries around the world. The project is promoted by Civicus: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, with the participation of 650 organizations in 110 countries worldwide. This initiative has the objective of fostering the study, recognition and enhancement of the role of civil society in development processes and the assertion of governance. In particular, with this initiative, the civic organizations involved will contribute to increasing the knowledge on the state of civil society in each country involved, favoring contacts among the parties (media, institutions, enterprises, universities) and strengthening the role of the organizations themselves. The survey assesses four indicators: the structure of civic organizations, the external social, political, juridical and economic contexts, the values promoted and defended by citizens, and the impact of civic organizations on those contexts. In the Czech Republic the project was carried out by the Civil Society Development Foundation of Prague in collaboration with the Faculty of Human Sciences of Charles University, and was supported by the Trust for Civil Society in Central & Eastern Europe.*



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In the second place, there is the general atmosphere of the country to take into account, characterized by the limitations of public spirit, the low level of trust and, especially, the still too invasive role of the State. "The civic organizations at work in the social and health area are strongly dependent on the State", explains Mrs. Vajdová. "On the one hand, these organizations are too focused on their clientele and the supply of services while,

on the other hand, they are unable to perform lobbying actions to change public policies, or to act as watchdogs. They have been domesticated after having been downgraded to the role of mere counterparts of a contract with the public institutions".

Nevertheless, the area of social and health services, together with environmental protection, remains one of the strong points of the civil society in the Czech

## EMANCIPATION FROM THE REGIME

*The Communist regime has had a pervasive impact on the civil society of the Czech Republic that is still felt today. This, for example, explains the predominant role of the State, the tendency to paternalism in the public sector, the lack of a strong middle class, and the interruption and active resumption of tradition of voluntary service.*

*In the years following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, new civic organizations have been set up and new laws have regulated the life of associations. Fifteen years of impetuous growth, supported in the early '90s by many foreign financiers for whom this active civil society was a determining player in the development of a new democracy.*

*As a result of these large transformations, nowadays observers need to make a distinction between the organizations that developed under the regime and those that emerged after 1989. The first type, though having maintained a relatively high number of members and resources, features obsolete structures, as in the case of the Union of Czech Women or the Youth Organization of Pioneers. The second type of organization, established after the collapse of Communism, is perceived as "authentic" and accounts for three quarters of the civic organizations in the country.*

*But what does "civil society" mean in the Czech Republic these days? "In public speeches, the term civil society usually*

*refers to an association of citizens independent from the State, which contributes to the development of civil values and values of social capital, and which is responsible for promoting democracy and social order", explains Tereza Vajdová, the researcher from the*



Republic. The report suggests that these concrete experiences should be a starting point for the re-assertion of active citizenship. And what happens next? "Civic organizations and public institutions together must build an atmosphere of trust in the country to serve as a base for a system of accountability of all the entities involved", Mrs. Vajdová concludes. Certainly a reasonable objective to achieve for civil society, when thinking that,

according to available data, 80% of the Czech population has great trust in non-profit organizations. The problem is that this trust collapses to 12% when referred to political parties. Furthermore, public structures still find it hard to have a dialogue with the active citizenship. This should not frighten the Czech government. Since Kafka's time, they have grown used to the concept of an administrative "castle" in this area.

*Civil Society Development Foundation of Prague which conducted the survey. However, "the influence of the Council of non-State non-profit-making organizations (for which the acronym 'NNO' is used) established by the Government has narrowed the debate to*

*those organizations legally organized as civic associations, foundations, public benefit corporations or ecclesiastical bodies". The Government's tacit objective is basically to support those non-profit activities that did not have an authorized organization before 1989. According to the Public Opinion Research Centre, only 4 Czech citizens out of 10 know the meaning of the term civil society, 8 out of 10 are familiar with concepts such as "volunteering service" or "voluntary work", while the meaning of "non profit" is unclear to most of them.*

*The Civil Society Index defines the civil society as "the arena between family, government and the market where people voluntarily associate to protect the common interest". The authors of the survey in the Czech Republic have obviously tried to adjust this definition to the national context, taking into account the new regulations introduced by the new national Civil Code and progress in the public debate in view of accession to the European Union. This explains why two specific groups have been excluded from the agglomeration of entities: the political parties, since, like in the rest of Europe, they are increasingly perceived as part of State power; and co-operatives, because in the tradition of the Czech Republic, unlike Italian and French experience, these are considered as purely economic entities.*



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