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## Development of citizen participation in Central and Eastern Europe after the EU enlargement and economic crises

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### ABSTRACT

The main focus of this article is the role of organized civil society in facilitating citizen engagement in Central and East European new EU member states after the EU accession and the recent economic crises. Using international comparative methodologies and data this article analyses democratic processes in the new member states focussing on the changes in strengths and weaknesses of citizen engagement. It shows the ways in which the post-enlargement process, especially the economic crisis affected the ability of CEE citizens – both directly, and via civil society organisations and trade unions – to be active participants of the multilevel governance processes. It finds that one of the key remaining gaps of the democratization process remains the relative weakness of state–citizens relationship. The impact of the economic crisis on the CEE countries was significant, in particular in regard to financial viability of organised civil society. However, economic crisis also acted as an important mobilization factor, and in all countries under study, civic participation, enabled by civil society and trade unions increased. New initiatives – in particular those tackling corruption and party campaign finance, saw NGOs focussing their advocacy efforts towards the government as well as actively mobilizing and engaging citizens. Across the CEE region, we are seeing gradual social learning, internalization of new norms and emergence of new identities – active citizens engaged with (and if necessary in opposition to) the state – directly (public mobilization and protests) and via organized civil society.

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### 1. Introduction

With the recent tumultuous developments in Poland – following the 2015 victory of the Law and Justice Party and subsequent government interference into the rule of law leading to mass demonstration against and in favour of these reforms – Central and Eastern European politics are once again back on the front pages of worlds newspapers. The current events in Poland highlight that the transformation of the Central and Eastern Europe after 1989/1991 did not follow one successful trajectory. On the other hand, countries of Central Europe and of the Baltic region embarked on a (mostly) successful reform course, establishing stable and consolidated democracies and market economies, joining the NATO (in three waves 1999, 2004 and 2009) and the European Union (also in three waves 2004, 2007 and 2013). On the other hand, the post-Soviet countries in the Eastern Europe (and Central Asia), with the exception of the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), did not follow similar path—their transition to democracy and market economy was partial, inconsistent and often unstable, like in Ukraine. Today, none of these countries can be described as fully functioning consolidated democracy, and some are clearly authoritarian states led by strong and charismatic leaders (Linz, 1996; Merkel, 2009).

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The main focus of this article is the role of organized civil society in facilitating citizen engagement in Central and East European new EU member states after the EU accession and the recent economic crises. Using international comparative methodologies and data – CSO Sustainability Index (USAID) and European Value Survey (EVS) allows the author to analyse democratic processes in the new member states in terms of comparative and theoretically grounded criteria while at the same time contextualizing the overall domestic development and focus on the changes in strengths and weaknesses of citizen engagement.

In the first part conceptual framework will be established, addressing the challenges in conceptualizing and analysing citizen engagement and the impact of European Integration on domestic structures and review the EU impact in the CEE region. The second, analytical part, will first review the development of citizen engagement in the CEE region prior to the commencement of the economic crises, before addressing challenges the economic crises constituted for citizen involvement and providing comparative overview of the development over time from 2003 to 2014. The final part is dedicated to summary and conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Civil society is famously difficult to define— in theoretical literature the term has been used for centuries, but during this period it has undergone numerous conceptual and connotative changes (Keane, 1988; Gellner, 1991; Seligman, 1992; Alexander, 1997; Habermas, 2003). They have been widely discussed by specialists (Kohler-Koch, 2008) often leading to significant political discussions (Green and Leff, 1997). At the core of the global discussion about the character and the role of civil society in a democratic political system was the question of whether civil society actors at the macro-level should influence politics actively. The substance of the dispute is more complicated: it is about the definition of the relationship between the state and civil society, which in post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe especially is considered to be essentially inconsistent: based on historical experience, CEE civil society is regarded as the opposition to state power (Arato and Cohen, 1990). According to Seligman, civil society has historically and repeatedly been the only ideological alternative to foreign hegemony in Central Europe (Seligman, 1992).

An extensive review of the literature reveals that on abstract level, ‘civil society’ is a term that delineates the area between the private sphere of interest and the state (Keane, 1988; Gellner, 1991; Seligman, 1992; Alexander, 1997; Habermas, 2003; Howard, 2003). The link between public sphere (PS) and civil society is established through active citizenship, defining the public sphere as an arena where active citizenship is realised through active civic and political engagement. Following Marc Morje Howard’s conception of civil society, PS rests on legal institutions and organising principles, that not only make up the essential core of any modern democratic system but are a key requirement for the notion of active citizenship and the concrete organisations that shape and define the particular character of the democratic system (Howard, 2003: 34–35).

Liebert and Trenz (2009:10–11) outline seven different conceptualisations (and research programmes) using civil society in the contemporary research on the (European) public sphere: (1) the historical approach, concentrating on traditions and path-dependency in European civil society; (2) the cultural approach, concentrating on values and attitudes and the ways these are conditioned by interaction with the media; (3) political-sociology approach, centring on the role of communication in the legitimisation of the European political order; (4) the communication approach, concentrating on the transnationalisation and functioning of the media landscape in Europe; (5) the social movement approach, highlighting transnationalisation of mobilisation and collective action; (6) the classical political science approach, focussing on performance of EU governance vis-à-vis the criteria of openness and transparency; and (7) the normative approach, focussing on normatively desirable institutional and procedural mechanisms of the future European constitutional order.

Within these approaches, three different forms and functions of civil society can be outlined. In representative democracy, civil society as a political community of the free and equal provides the basis for political mobilisation and channels of articulation of diverse interests; ensuring balanced representation. This notion highlights the opposition of the civil society towards the state, and the role of civil society in ensuring autonomy, as well as values of human rights and dignity. In participative democracy, rooted in the distinction of the various spheres of life, which are nexuses of civil society and transcend in establishing an autonomous realm for self-realisation, civil society provides effective channels of communication between the state and the citizens, and ensures inclusion of diverse (social and others) groups. In deliberative democracy, civil society is seen as an autonomous sphere-forming ‘fertile ground’ for the construction of self-interest and the exercise of self-governance, and civil society plays a crucial role as a facilitator of the deliberation process (Guasti, 2014; Liebert and Trenz, 2010).

In their article based on an expert online empirical survey Kohler-Koch and Quitkat (2009) introduce four conceptions, based on implicit functions civil society fulfils. First, the definition embedded in the representative function of civil society outlines the role of civil society as ‘giving voice’ to citizens. In this definition, civil society includes “trade unions, employers’ and producers’ organisations; non-governmental organisations representing general interests such as environment, human rights, social welfare, health and culture; professional associations and grass-root organisations”. The second definition centres on public discourse and sees civil society as a fluid mechanism, or a transmission belt of societal problems. The third concept revolves around that of self-constitution and self-mobilisation, fostering differentiation and self-governance, as well as balancing between the various spheres of life. Finally, the fourth definition, rooted in the concept of public well-being, casts civil society as the guardian of values such as solidarity, fostering social bonds and commitment to the community.

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