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Chasing the green buck? Environmental activism in post-communist Baltic States

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the dynamics and evolution of issues on the agenda of Baltic environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) since the collapse of communism. The past research on Baltic environment activism suggests that these enjoy high visibility because they tapped the core societal views of natural environment as a crucial asset of a nation. As we demonstrate in this paper, the changes in agendas of Baltic environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS) make clear that the rhetorical toolbox of 'national environment' is often used to mainly achieve greater financial gains for individual members, rather than for society at large. We illustrate how the dearth of economic opportunities for domestic public has impacted perceptions of 'nature' advocated by the environmental activists, focussing specifically on national perceptions of ownership and the resulting actions appropriating 'nature' as a source for economic development, only tangentially attaining environmental outcomes on the way. The vision that the 'environment' is an economic resource allowed ENGO activists to cooperate with the domestic policymaking, while tapping international networks and donors for funding. Throughout the past decades they worked to secure their own and their members' particularistic economic interests and, as we demonstrate, remained disengaged from the political process and failed to develop broader reproach with publics.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, civil society has become one of the focal points for studies of interest based activities, operating locally but following a broader societal agenda. Most analyses view civil society as a realm, where individuals interact outside the dominant social, economic and political structural constraints (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Reisinger et al., 1995). Unfettered from state control and freed from established institutional pressures, civil society is generally perceived to be the forum where citizens negotiate common agendas and join in collective action (Chandhoke, 2001). As such, participation in civil society groups performs two interrelated yet distinct functions. First, civil society groups feature as a clearing house for individual grievances and concerns which cut across social groups. The proponents of this view hold that civil society helps prioritise competing societal interests, allows overcoming of the collective action problem and supports policymakers' dialogue with society affected (Almond and Verba, 1963). Another perspective suggests that such groups amortise the failings and deficiencies of policies, indicating to political leadership which reform opportunities are likely to garner public support (Meyer, 2004). Civil society initiatives allow policymakers to identify issues and grievances overlooked by the entrenched

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bureaucratic elites and incumbent politicians, allow state to draw citizens' views into policymaking process and improve policy effectiveness. Despite their difference regarding the focus of activity, creating bonds between citizens in the first instance and between state institutions and society in the second, both functions of civil society are widely acknowledged to diversify social interactions, improve civic culture, make political decision-making more accountable to populations they serve and allow citizens to shape policy priorities.

Yet, the real-life incarnations of civil society, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are set in the environment of concrete political institutions and reflect on the existing policy agendas. NGOs link political elites with the wider society, when they articulate interests which the agencies of the state cannot identify or are unable to address adequately (Diamond et al., 1997). The NGOs evaluate policies, provide general public with access to information and engage with domestic and international policymakers and thus, are not always antagonising politicians. Indeed, political leaders have sought to engage NGOs in public–private partnerships on issues where the state's institutional capacity is low and where necessary decisions might be unpopular with the affected publics (Zakaria, 2013). As a result, citizen groups increasingly profile themselves as policymakers' advisors, while policymakers treat NGOs as partners in implementation and monitoring of policies where existing institutions lack expertise and experience.

The capacity of NGOs to engage with policymakers effectively however, was significantly undermined by the mode of political and economic transition in the post-communist region. The radical deregulation and neoliberal discourse both positioned as the only viable routes towards full membership in the European community of states and societies (Wallace et al., 2012). These alternatives to the socialist centralism emphasised the retreat of the state from societal organisations, marginalised representation of interests that did not have clearly identifiable economic outcomes, and constrained civil society activism in the highly deregulated societal, political and increasingly so, economic contexts. For example, pre-accession funding for civil society initiatives was made subject to increasing international partnerships whereby national and sub-national governments were encouraged to cooperate with the NGOs in pursuit of development goals domestically (Grosse, 2010; Orr, 2008). The introduction of institutions that grant civil society organisations access to policymaking, enhance public debate in a forum where grassroots initiatives could be articulated has rarely used to pursue collective actions in the manner that extolled challenges to the political decision making. Instead, 'the hybrids of democratisation and "institutional façade" and the mixture of marketization and clientelism [...] perpetuated unfavourable settings of socialism for unions and has added new constraints' (Kutter and Trappmann, 2010, p. 47).

Scholarship on post-communist civil society groups has long suggested that the EU membership conferred specific rights and responsibilities on civil society actors, but their enforcement was feasible only for short time after the EU accession (Fagan, 2005). The EU accession of several post-communist states of Central Eastern Europe (CEE) allowed scholars to analyse developments in the civil society sector there through the lens of enlargement conditionality process (For example, Parau, 2009). Some past work has disaggregated the effects of EU's explicit enforcement instruments from the impact of more implicit mechanisms of the enlargement conditionality making clear that those civil society groups that work on the respective policy realm gained initial capacity to draw on the support of central policy actors, while the rest were pushed into obscurity (Pieper, 2006). As a result, the local grassroots NGOs have rarely benefitted from the EU capacity building programmes, while many NGOs developed into capital-based, elite-led organisations of service providers working on financial inputs from the international donors. In sum, while both types of non-state actors have gained sufficient autonomous action capacity to co-operate with the state, they were still ill-equipped to advance societal demands and hold state actors accountable for policies implemented.

The stable flow of external funding meant that post-communist NGOs could participate in transnational networks and European umbrella organisations to learn how to shape and implement EU policies, both at the EU and the domestic level (Obradovic and Pleines, 2007; Pleines, 2011). And though, the NGOs launched campaigns against national governments, raised national profile and gained international recognition, all their actions were predicated upon availability of the external resources (Agarin, 2011; Orr, 2011). This dependence on resources of both the states and the NGOs during and after the accession meant that civil society groups played a role in policymaking only when they attached a check to their advice (See, Henderson, 2002). Thus, despite these ample opportunities offered by the EU enlargement to strengthen capacity of civil society, the NGOs from accession states have rarely become systematically empowered. Instead, civil society groups needed to repeatedly carve out the new niche for engagement with both the state policies which were largely prescriptive, and society, which was preoccupied largely with more immediate economic concerns.

Many analysis point out that the domestic political factors impacted the NGO activities and over time relegated civil society actors to the role of auxiliary governmental advisors; while other scholars indicate that the European monitoring of the member-states gradually strengthened the autonomy of central government and allowed these to outmanoeuvre civil society groups more critical of the overall direction of policy development. Our paper overviews these debates and suggests that while many civil society groups are involved in and claim responsibility on particularistic agendas, the long-term outcomes of their engagement feed into broader – and as yet, unanticipated – outcomes. We focus specifically on the case of environmental groups in the Baltic States. We observe that the NGOs that started off with concerns over nature, have edged towards broader issues of participation in policymaking, whilst those that have established themselves as pioneers of the 'green cause' have originally worked on a rather different agenda. This paper builds on the prior research on ENGOs which claimed that environmental groups reflect the close connection between the narratives about the 'nature' as a part and parcel of 'national resource'. The following discussion qualifies these past findings and argues that the citizens active in the protection of environment, primarily targeted financial inputs for their own – and their groups' – economic welfare.

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