

# Civil Society in the Post-Communist Context: Linking Theoretical Concept and Social Transformation

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**G**reat historical developments always are wrapped up in their own rhetoric, upholding the flow of political slogans, ideological clichés, and philosophical ideas. Until dramatic changes in the communist world occurred in late 1980s and early 1990s, the idea of civil society generally had been forgotten under the pressure of other, more urgent concerns. Despite its deep philosophical roots, it was long believed to have been missing a programmatic element. As a consequence, the notion of civil society only appeared randomly in the works of political philosophers and historians. It was the developments in Eastern Europe in late 1980s and early 1990s, invigorated by region's vibrant tradition of civil society and a strong popular yearning for its highly valued condition of freedom, pluralism, and participation, that endowed this concept with a new shine of "living resonance" and "evocativeness."<sup>1</sup> Powerful transmogrifications in the socialist world allowed the concept of civil society to reenter political and academic debates.

It is not surprising that the concept of civil society provides a perspective from which critical analysis of transitional processes can and should be undertaken. The subject is of great importance in view of the rapidly growing awareness that a "healthy" civil society stands as a key for democratic stability as well as effective economic institutions. For example, Fukuyama argues that collective values and cultural norms can be major determinants of economic success in different societies.<sup>2</sup> Putnam, studying civic traditions in Italy, concluded that levels of civic engagement might directly affect economic performance.<sup>3</sup> Most notable, stalled transition reforms throughout Eastern Europe and, to a greater extent, in the former Soviet Union raised questions about direct and simple correlation between the free market and economic efficiency. Fran Tonkiss suggests that in the absence of strong civil society, the alternatives faced by transitional countries boil down to "a crude choice between unfettered markets and a reversion to communism,

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[because] deregulation and privatization [can] not in themselves insure economic efficiency, let alone political stability or social welfare.”<sup>14</sup> As market-related issues began to be discussed more often in relation to and in the context of civil society, the conceptualizing on this subject matter shifted from philosophical and theoretical realms to a more prescriptive and policy-oriented domain.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, I suggest that to facilitate a deeper inquiry into the programmatic dimension of civil society, which organizes and advances many of the reform measures and current political processes in post-socialist societies, we need to categorize a rapidly growing body of literature and distill differences and similarities in the Western and Eastern European tradition of conceptualizing on this issue. As Van Der Zweerde once observed, the “empirical reality, the academic concept, and the political slogan of civil society are all part of the same social reality.”<sup>15</sup> To take his idea one step further, most effective and productive reform measures should be designed on the basis of the theories that most adequately represent social reality. Second, by critically investigating the chronology and mixed record of reform policies, I hope to demonstrate that despite the strong national(ist) and communitarian tradition in the conceptualization of civil society in Eastern Europe, which emphasizes communal solidarity and trust, many of the market-related and democratic transitional reforms were designed on the basis of Western-type individualist conceptualization of civil society, traditionally privileged by neoliberal orthodoxy. The adverse effect of such strong accentuation on individualism was the erosion of the fragile sense of solidarity, which indigenous tradition attempted to revive in the national form. In this respect, transitional measures orchestrated from the outside by Western advisers and readily adopted by national reformers without careful consideration of the alternatives, represented a striking continuity with the Soviet totalitarian project, which aimed at atomization and fragmentation of national societies. Moreover, these reform measures overlooked some of the “original” forms and expressions of civil society, such as church and religion, rooted in presocialist traditions, which reappeared in the postsocialist reality.

The agenda for contributions into the civil society debates is precisely to particularize it, that is, to demonstrate how an idea that originated in European philosophical discourse has different referents, even within European societies. An important general point to emerge is that, so far, civil society debate and Western aid policies have been too narrowly determined by Western models of liberal individualism. It is time for the scholarship concerned with these issues to move beyond the traditional confines and pay closer attention to culturally sensitive explanations as a means of enriching existing developmental strategies and models.

### **Eastern European Tradition of Civil Society: Constructing an Alternative Polis**

For decades, civil society in Eastern Europe has lived with its back turned against the totalitarian state. Attempts at suppression of civil society by the state machinery produced a double effect. On the one hand, most people passively retreated into “internal emigration,” becoming “civil society in conspiracy.”<sup>16</sup> On the other

hand, those who desired to participate in political life without being associated with the communist regime could do so only outside official politics.

Independent centers of power and movements of cultural dissent taking shape in the 1950s and 1960s functioned in a highly restricted environment in which a single, overarching ideological, political, and economic hierarchy possessed monopoly on representation and tolerated no rivals. The movements of the dissidents underwent several successive “thaws” and “freezes,” with each turn retreating underground and subsequently returning as the pressures of the regime eased. Dissident groups were without any tangible capacity to become a real counterweight to the state’s exclusive right on power and control within society, or at least curb its “self-aggrandizing appetite.”<sup>7</sup> However, the mere existence of dissident groups had an immense symbolic credit in itself. In the writings of many dissidents, civil society appeared as a “non-political politics,”<sup>8</sup> “parallel polis,”<sup>9</sup> “alternative society,” “the power of the powerless,”<sup>10</sup> and “the strength of the weak.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the West, where civil society was taken for granted as a normal human and societal condition, the absence of such condition in Eastern Europe was felt strongly due to the dissidents’ recurrent reminder of this ideal in their works and activities. In Gellner’s words, whereas in Eastern Europe civil society has been “conspicuous by its very absence;” the Atlantic community, endowed with civil society since 1945, “has enjoyed it without giving it much or any thought. . . . It is only the rediscovery of this ideal in Eastern Europe in the course of the last two decades that has reminded the inhabitants of the liberal states on either shore of the northern Atlantic of just what it is that they possess and ought to hold dear.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite state efforts to suppress or crush the dissent, a continuing interest in the subject of civil society—both intellectual and practical—was spurred by the obvious failure of reform-oriented communists to liberalize these systems from the top down. It was further fuelled by the “conviction that these one-party systems could function only by thwarting this region’s old tradition of civil society.”<sup>13</sup> No matter what characteristic notions the leaders of democratic opposition coined, they were united by the viewpoint of civil society as an alternative to the state; and, in a more practical sense, by the commitment to preserve some limited amount of social independence and to give it an institutionalized expression. Therefore, the primary task of new democracies created by the dissidents was to rebuild the associations (political parties and movements, unions, business associations, publishing houses, churches, etc.) and to revive identities (national, ethnic, religious, etc.) that have remained for so long in the shadow of the state but traditionally made their initial appearances in civil society.

### **Sociological and Economic Theories of Civil Society**

There is now a voluminous collection of works on civil society, reflecting a great deal of disagreement about the essence of this concept but hardly ever offering a rigorous definition. Different theoretical traditions attributed to the proliferation of numerous and often conflicting visions of civil society, which can be roughly divided into two broad categories. In its sociological meaning, civil society

denotes a set of diverse voluntary associations and comes close to, and sometimes is synonymous with, community. The cluster of “natural” informal groupings within a community prevents potential fragmentation and atomization of the larger society and may spontaneously or voluntarily institutionalize into the formal associations. As an economic concept, civil society is closely linked to the market, individualism, and entrepreneurship and, therefore, denotes the realm of economic practices, attitudes, and relationships.

One of the most debatable issues in considering civil society as a sociological concept is its relationship to the state. Some liberal political theorists believe that civil society, is located in the conceptual space distinct from that of the state and can therefore stand on its own, without political support. According to this viewpoint, civil society as an embodiment of institutional and ideological pluralism, counterbalances the state by restricting its authoritarian instincts and by imposing social accountability on the state.

According to John Keane, civil society and the state are two institutionally distinct “unworkable extremes,” where civil society is “an ideal-typical category that both describes and envisages a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected nongovernmental institutions that tend to be nonviolent, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions that ‘frame,’ constrict, and enable their activities.”<sup>14</sup> Zbigniew Rau echoes Keane and understands the complex relationship between state and civil society as distinct entities with firmly outlined boundaries. “Civil society,” he argues, “is a historically evolved form of society that presupposes the existence of a space . . . between those relationships which result from the family commitments and those which involve the individual’s obligations toward the state. Civil society is therefore a space free from both family influence and state power.”<sup>15</sup> Terry Nardin’s study of the development of civil society in Eastern Europe also concludes that civil society is a separate, alternative sphere, existing in “the shadow of the communist state.”<sup>16</sup>

This liberal standpoint asserts that associations of civil society function independently from organizational and financial state control. Thus, the state cannot “claim any right to regulate, direct, or impose its will on citizens, unless it violates the basic arrangement of the political order.”<sup>17</sup>

Such accentuation of nonpolitical aspects of civil society provoked two major criticisms. First, civil society’s complete separateness from the state was criticized for providing an inevitably negative notion of the state and, at the same time, for excessively idealizing civil society. In his book *Conditions of Liberty*, Gellner reveals the intellectual and political complacency of liberal theory of civil society, which presupposes that existing civil societies are “havens of complexity and choice, that they are engines of righteousness, that they provide a natural habitat in which ‘liberty’ can and does flourish.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Arato fears that interests in civil rights and free associations can often disguise hidden motivations, such as the seizure of state power.<sup>19</sup>

Second, the followers of Gramscian tradition believe that civil society and the state are only analytically and methodologically distinct elements in social

fabric, but they are closely interrelated or even interdependent in reality. For Michael Walzer, civil society incorporates all uncoerced associational forms and identities that we value outside of, prior to, or in the shadow of state and citizenship. No state can survive for long if it is wholly alienated from civil society. The state both “frames civil society and occupies space within it. It fixes the boundary conditions and the basic rule of all associational activity (including political activity).”<sup>20</sup>

Even in the developed Western countries with the longstanding tradition of a strong civil society, the third sector acquires increasingly pronounced political contours, both as a provider of social services and the target of governmental policies.

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Even though civic associations in the West flourish “beyond” the state, the government shapes the institutional architecture of the public sphere through formal laws and political culture. As civic organizations increasingly become the objective of governmental policies, two processes—the “politicization” of civil society and the “pluralization”<sup>21</sup> of the

state—simultaneously take place, tightening the state and civil society together.

These rather conflicting views of the boundaries between civil society and the state are attributable to the theoretical traditions derived from the classical heritage of Hegel, who viewed the state as a political framework for civil society and considered civil society to be subordinated to the state, and Locke, who regarded government as only an instrument of civil society, by which the rights of its members could be promoted.

The Soviet-type system clearly resembled “the Hegelian constellation.” Without formally destroying the institutions of civil society, the communist state replaced the normative order of society with its own version of society. Indeed, all voluntary organizations, be they sport clubs, youth associations, hunting and fishing clubs, or a book societies, were forced to promote Marxism-Leninism among their members and employees. This, according to Zbigniew Rau, equaled to the dissolution of civil society. “With the abolition of the voluntary institutions of civil society, its characteristic features disappeared. Individual values represented by these institutions were eliminated from public life and were replaced by the values of the Party/state.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, from the sociological perspective, the programmatic message of new democratic leadership called for overcoming a civic vacuum by thwarting state authoritarian control.

Civil society as an economic concept derives from the classical heritage of Adam Smith and Max Weber. In his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Smith developed contemporary principles of individualistic society, in which the enlightened selfishness of all citizens, guided by an “invisible hand,”

maximizes the welfare of society. In contrast, Weber's vision of modern society was pervaded by rationalism. According to Weber, the general rationalization of all kinds of economic activities was embodied in the rise of capitalism. What was important specifically in Western Europe for the emergence of the "spirit of capitalism" was that rationality in economic life occurred in the midst of a much more inclusive rationalization of politics and culture as well as the forms, forces, and relations of production, creating an orderly and calculable environment. In other words, the economy was deeply embedded in the social life. This perspective extols a long-standing tradition of individualism as one of the most appealing attributes of social life in the West. Civil society, from such a standpoint, rests on a particular concept of an individual, driven by profit, rational calculations of individual interests, and entrepreneurial initiativeness.

### East versus West: Conflicting Visions of Civil Society

Clearly, it is difficult to find a common understanding of the meaning of civil society among experts of different theoretical and political commitments. What strikes as a commonality in these diverse interpretations is their focus on typically Western established organizational forms or patterns of individual behavior within civil society. Civil society is not "automatically identical with 'Atlantic society' or with modernity, or with any 'end of history' because there is no pertinent reason why we should limit the idea of civil society to those empirical social formations which have been qualified or qualify themselves as such in human history."<sup>23</sup> Such privileging leads to narrow "prescriptionism," which explains a mixed record of developmental policies that attempted to build open civil societies in the countries with a "strong national susceptibility."

Traditionally, even in the absence of a monolithic "Western" concept, the vision of civil society in the West has been, and still remains, considerably different from that in Eastern Europe. The conceptual point of departure is an individual human being, rather than a nation. The idea of national identity is considered a "legitimate, but limited form of life." This thesis, as Keane rightly observed, "contains a paradoxical corollary: national identity, an important support of civil society and other democratic institutions, is best preserved by restricting its scope in favor of *non-national* identities that reduce the probability of its transformation into anti-democratic nationalism."<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Western-type civil society rests on a particular concept of an initiative individualist—a democratic citizen who, regardless of his/her national and cultural heritage, believes in democratic liberties, institutions, and processes; who is willing to assert rights against the state constrained by legality; and whose civic engagement is mediated by trust. Most important, the "natural" evolution of social order in the West ensured that openness, individualism, and mobility have deep cultural roots and traditions. This condition has been missing from the historical experience of most Eastern European societies. As John Gray once noted, "the viable regimes which emerge in the wake of communist totalitarianism must have the character of civil societies, but need not (and often will not) resemble Western liberal democracies in other important respects."<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, a fairly common notion of civil society throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union is intimately connected with nationalism. During the long years of Soviet domination, national communities within the socialist bloc developed “the desire and the capacity to challenge the legitimacy of the larger ideological and spatial community within which they were embedded—whether the particular form this took was societies poised against the party-state, Eastern European countries poised against the Soviet Union, or republics poised against the center. The collapse of socialism, the bloc, and the state, therefore, was not just a matter of regime- and state-rejection; it was also a matter of national liberation.”<sup>26</sup> The end of socialism, therefore, symbolized a triple emancipation from state authoritarianism, central economic control, and Soviet supra-nationalism. The liberation from the Soviet rule and subsequent creation of a new social order were essentially *nationals* issue. Previously marginalized national consolidation, integrity, traditions, culture, and interests are reaffirmed in postsocialist politics.

This “national renaissance” in Eastern Europe often contains conflicting political traditions when human rights or other values of pluralist democracy are “overshadowed by antimodernist and traditionalist trends.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, communist efforts to replace national identities with proletarian internationalism produced a post-communist political culture, remarkable for its powerful ethnic, religious, and political intolerance and animosity, entrenched paternalism, widespread corporatism, and all-pervasive populism. Post-communist political culture reflects a strong sense of a nation being above all other forms of social organization. The demise of communism has deprived individuals of the sense of predictability and stability. Hence, the powerful yearnings for group identity and community values and the need for a sense of rootedness and belonging often were built on exclusionary mythologies. Obsession with “homogeneity, unity, and purity”<sup>28</sup> was demonstrated most dramatically in the Balkans but was potentially present in every Eastern European country.

On the other hand, the Eastern European tradition is not coherent or homogeneous. It eclectically embraced memories of exclusiveness and tribalism with memories of tolerance and solidarity. The revolutions of 1989–91 occurred under the mottos of civil society and popular sovereignty. The idea of civil society “energized large human groups and allowed them to pass the system-imposed threshold of fear.”<sup>29</sup>

To save the liberal project, rediscover Eastern European civic tradition, and create the sense of “unity in diversity,” intellectuals and political leaders committed to a market-based economy and democracy and had to turn nationalism toward its constructive end. As a result, generally exclusive liberal-democratic and national(ist) values conflated within intellectual discourse into a complex single fusion, in which the national(ist) ingredient often dominated civil society, liberal democracy, and free markets. In Ukraine, for example, where both political and cultural community was to be reinvented, the idea of national integrity and independence often overshadowed the idea of democratic civil society. The issue of national consolidation was particularly acute because contrasting regional differences in historical traditions and cultural heritage produced support for

conflicting political interests and orientations that threatened the viability of the weak Ukrainian state. Mykola Ryabchuk supported this position, arguing that “[s]ince nationalism is the driving force for rebuilding civil society in the non-Russian European Soviet republics, the fundamental precondition of the reemergence of this society is a high level of national consciousness.”<sup>30</sup> In fact, the first wave of civil society activation in Ukraine was inspired and instigated in late 1980s to early 1990s by pro-independent opposition groups who formed a distinct grouping—*Narodna Rada*—in the parliament of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. The demands of independence articulated by this grouping received the widespread support of student organizations, ecological associations, and independent trade unions, providing evidence that civil society was perceived in terms of national, rather than individual, rights. Unfortunately, once independence had been achieved, national reformers in Ukraine proved unable to make their interests instrumental in determining subsequent reforms. The irony of their situation was that when the advocates of Ukraine’s independence penetrated into the non-transparent corridors of the political system, their ties with broader society were loosened. Subsequently, despite loud and numerous claims of more recent opposition activists to represent the interests of the entire society, the actions of opposition activists have never again enjoyed such a widespread support “from below.”

Thus, the crucially important status of the idea of civil society in the post-socialist context is determined by its combined appeal to and endorsement of both national(ist) and liberal-democratic values and principles. Civil society is perceived as a harbor for a nation—“a cultural, linguistic, or religious community rooted in sacred tradition.”<sup>31</sup> Instead of two mutually opposed and hostile divisions of nation and state, this conceptualization of civil society allows for the reinvention of a viable integrity of nation and state.

It is tempting, but misleading, to counterpose civil society and a nation in this context—a strong sense of nationhood and shared values are essential to the formation of civil society. They create a sphere of trust, tolerance, and solidarity among the members of a community, which is a precondition for cooperative behavior and social engagement that cannot be secured either by legal formulas of citizenship or by officially promoted economic and associational pluralism. “National identity,” in the words of March and Olsen, “[is] fundamental to structuring rules of appropriate behavior and institutions associated with those identities both infuse the state with shared meaning and expectations and provide political legitimacy that facilitates mobilization of resources from society.”<sup>32</sup> Civil society, therefore, is more than a narrow category confined to legal frameworks, entrepreneurial environment, and citizen participation in NGOs, charitable foundations, social movements, voluntary associations, and the like. Meaningful civil society requires a shared culture—a system of norms, values, implicit understandings, beliefs, and ingrained “habits of the heart.” As Gellner observed, for an average person

the limits of his [her] culture are, if not quite the limits of the world, at any rate the limits of his employability, social acceptability, dignity, effective participation and citizenship. They define the limits of the use of his conceptual intuitions, access to



the rules of the game, and to the intelligibility of the social world; beyond these limits he becomes gaffe-prone, inept, subject to derision and contempt, and seriously handicapped in any endeavor. Hence . . . the existence of a secure preferably extensive political unit identified with that culture and committed to its protection and enforcement is his most pressing and powerful political concern.<sup>33</sup>

Culture, therefore, has three principal social corollaries: it ensures the emergence of a “modular” individual, that is, an individual “capable of combining into effective associations and institutions, *without* these being total, many-stranded, underwritten by ritual”; it makes “*possible* Civil Society, the existence of countervailing and plural political associations and economic institutions, which at the same time are not stifling”; and “it also makes *mandatory* the strength of ethnic [national] identity, arising from the fact that man is no longer tied to a specific social niche, but is instead deeply linked to a culturally defined pool.”<sup>34</sup> Conscious political action can shape identity, solidarity, and trust only indirectly through growing awareness and respect for cultural context. Therefore, a key to rebuilding civil society as a domain of cultural frames and codes is in constructing civic nationalism, restoring solidarity and tolerance among the fellow citizens, and recovering trust in public institutions and roles.

### Church as the “Original” Expression of Civil Society in the East

Such divergent reasoning in conceptualizing civil society in the West and the East creates a conflicting set of references and suggests noninterchangeable models of social and political framework. Indeed, Western tendency to privilege individualism and established associational forms overshadowed some of the “original” expressions of civil society in Eastern Europe, such as religion and church. At the fundamental level, religion, with its cultural derivatives and symbolic forms, shapes people’s perceptions of their society and contributes to the creation of the sense of solidarity by nurturing cultural values within family and community. A recently reinvented notion of “civil religion” reveals inclusive and nondogmatic sides of religion aimed at societal integration. In this sense, religion and civil society are not “unworkable extremes.” Rather, as Van Der Zweerde observed:

[C]ivil society does hold a place for religion and church, but not a specific one. Religion, as one of the forms through which human beings make sense of their existence and experience, belongs to the intellectual and spiritual sphere of worldview, conviction (personal or collective), or ideology. As such, religious convictions are among the sources of motivation of citizens, and in the contemporary world they are certainly among the more important sources of motivation of the free associational activity that constitutes civil society.<sup>35</sup>

Undeniably, many of the religiously motivated citizens are highly dedicated and active members of civil society and contribute a great deal to its development. The churches themselves can be viewed as free associations, and their members build strong solidaristic communities on the basis of shared religious convictions. What is important, from the perspective of civil society, is that there should be no differentiation between or privileging of any of the sources of inner motivation to act like a “good citizen,” be it a religious, nonreligious, or antireligious one. In

the words of Van Der Zwerde, “a local branch of the Salvation Army is just as much part of civil society as . . . an association of collectors of World Football championship paraphernalia.”<sup>36</sup>

There is growing evidence that religion, which is often inseparable from the sense of nation in Eastern Europe and the New Independent States (NIS), has contributed to the democratization process in the past and continues to do so today in two important ways. First, religion has been a powerful “symbolic resource,” and a “fund of collective memories.”<sup>37</sup> The church often sustained and preserved cultural communities, the very existence of which has been threatened by annihilating state-imposed communist ideologies. As one Polish author observed, the church “thought of itself, in

keeping with the long tradition, as the depository of national values, the supreme public authority, the representative of a nation deprived of sovereign representation.”<sup>38</sup>

Second, prior to Soviet collapse, religion served as an institutional space for developing civil society. This was most prominently expressed in

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Poland, where the Catholic Church challenged the legitimacy of the socialist regime by serving as a venue for civic activity and providing an intellectual platform for solidifying oppositional thinking. As Bishop Dabrowski explained, “[The] Catholic Church and the nation in Poland have always been together. Whenever there have been conflicts between the ruling government and Polish society, the Church has always stood up to protect society.”<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, religion and the church have often been associated with the rebirth of nations in Eastern Europe. In addition, growing insecurity and the loss of traditional orientations that accompanied dramatic transformations in Eastern European countries after the Soviet collapse turned a considerable part of the population toward the church. The public place and role of religion dramatically expanded as the old restrictions on religious practices were abandoned, and people searched for new spiritual foundations. In the early and mid-1990s, Poland’s Catholic Church claimed the spiritual loyalty of 95.6 percent of the citizens; Romania’s Orthodox Church embraced of 87 percent of the citizens; Hungary’s census put Catholics at 66 percent and Lutherans and Calvinists at 22 percent; in Slovakia and Slovenia, Christianity became a mass phenomenon with roughly 70 percent of the population being regarded by the church as Catholics; and 80 percent of Bulgarian parents declared their acceptance of religious education at schools. The dynamic of religious practices is well illustrated in Ukraine, where in the ten years between 1988 and 1998, the number of religious communities increased threefold from 6,179 to 19,780. Even though the late 1990s witnessed an average 15 percent

decline in religious practices, no other form of free associational activity could compete with the church.<sup>40</sup>

It is no surprise then that the discussions of civil society are inevitably fringed by considerations of national idea and religion in Eastern Europe and the NIS. In fact, Van Der Zweerde describes the emergence of what he labels “democratic Orthodox intelligentsia” in Russia, a group actively engaged in a variety of civic activities, including the debates on the national idea based on Orthodox tradition and principles. Its position echoes the views of intellectuals across Eastern Europe, who criticize the new liberal order and Western ideals for their coldness and lack of spiritual values. However, in the distinct Eastern European and particularly Russian setting, this does not necessarily imply the failure of civil society: “To the extent to which these discussions practice recognition of freedom of conscience and of opinion, and to the extent to which they take place within a sphere of associational activity, protected by law but initiated ‘from below,’ they are part of civil society.”<sup>41</sup>

Unfortunately, an understanding of the ways in which religion can be integrated into the notion of civil society and necessity to redefine the Western-type idea of civil society largely escaped Western donors’ sensitivities. Amidst hasty efforts to democratize the former socialist world, Westerners overlooked this significant detail. Subsequently, although Western efforts were initially in line with popular opinion in the East, the lack of attention to this issue and, therefore, the failure to produce some substantive consensus in conceptualizing civil society directly affected Western donors’ practices building market institutions, promoting democracy, and strengthening civil society in Eastern Europe and the NIS. Over time, the uneven success of these efforts raised serious concerns about their effectiveness.

### **Neoliberal Reforms in the Post-Communist World**

Economically centered individualism, with its emphasis on rationalism and utility maximization, together with market liberalization and deregulation, have become the central pillars of the neoliberal orthodoxy. It promised greater prosperity and sustainable economic development and has been picked up readily and promoted by democratic opposition across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In practical terms, the neoliberal reform package focused primarily on the market dimension of “transition.” Privatization, deregulation, and price and trade liberalization figured most prominently on top of the reform agendas of both Western advisers and national reformers. Specifically, privatization in all forms and shapes—large, small, re-privatization, the creation of new private enterprises—came to the fore. Economists, politicians, and academics rushed to explore the subject, producing books, speeches, monographs, and conference papers. In the West, former Sovietologists became “instant” experts on the region and “transition.” Political scientists, anthropologists, and historians found themselves in low demand. As Bull and Ingham observed, “neoliberal economists, perhaps most notably Sachs . . . were initially most confident in their advice as to how change should proceed.”<sup>42</sup> Private ownership was thought to be a critical

and crucial element of a market economy. A successful solution to the privatization dilemma was believed to be of paramount importance to the future of liberal capitalism and democracy in postsocialist countries.

For political and social reasons, neoliberal measures were introduced across the region with varying speed and degree of commitment on behalf of the governments and societies in general. Some postsocialist states, most notably Poland and Russia, adopted shock-therapy strategy. Others were more cautious and gradualist in their approach toward economic liberalization, and they continued with policies of subsidizing and other supports for fear of the social costs and political consequences of a rapid economic reorientation. Theoretically, the introduction of the market economy could have spurred the development of civil society in its sociological meaning by creating organizations that were financially independent from the state. In practice, during paradoxical transmogrifications across Eastern Europe, former nomenklatura members became the heralds of market and democracy. Privatization often has involved the corrupt transfer of assets into the private hands of former communist *apparatchiks*.

In retrospect, clear evidence demonstrates that no matter what pace of marketization the countries subsequently adopted, they all experienced similar problems of growing unemployment, inflation, fall of production, and general economic decline. The difference was in the degree of problems, not in the nature of reform side effects. Due to the overall institutional weakness in Eastern European societies, the surviving social and cultural legacies of the communist past, and the uncritical embrace of these simplistically perceived models, not only did the transition to market economy turn socially devastating to the majority of population, but rampant corruption and growing authoritarianism reinforced feelings of alienation from and opposition to the state, which was generally associated with highly corrupted elites. General disillusionment with neoliberal policies was captured by Edgar Feige, who said the “historical laboratory of the transition economies has revealed that liberalization, stabilization, and privatization may be necessary but are by no means sufficient conditions for creating ‘market economies.’”<sup>43</sup>

Even in the open, individualistic, mobile Western societies, neoliberalism has been blamed widely for eroding the foundations of social cohesion and undermining the solidaristic sense of community by pushing market principles to an extreme. Whereas conventional wisdom portrays individualism as a source of pride, it often goes unnoticed that Western heritage, in fact, is permeated by the duality of individualistic tradition and strong communitarian tendencies. In the United States, for example, where individualism is most pronounced in the popular culture, “supposedly individualistic Americans have also been, historically, hyperactive joiners,”<sup>44</sup> which explains the rapid rise of giant corporations and the proliferation of durable voluntary associations in American society. Indeed, it is not one-sided, accentuated individualism, but the combination of both individualism and sociability that is critical for economic and social life because most economic activity is carried by the groups.

In fact, a perfectly individualistic society likely would resemble a Hobbesian state of totally atomized individuals, whose relations are determined solely by

self-interest. A classic, anti-individualism argument was articulated by Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*. He considered individualism a moderate form of egoism, which in the long run “attacks and destroys all others and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness,”<sup>45</sup> and is, therefore, potentially destructive for public life. More recently, Furedi argued that the fusion of individualism with the market eventually produced a phenomenon of individuation—individual alienation that undermined the relations of trust in society.<sup>46</sup> Along this line, Fenton observed that as a consequence of extreme marketization, “political support was mobilized by recourse to such popular themes as crime, family breakdown and social disintegration, allowing nostalgia for community and social cohesion to fill the void.”<sup>47</sup>

Among the unfortunate consequences of neoliberal reforms in the post-communist world was further erosion of fragile solidarity among the members of society and of the sense of belonging to national community, which had gained strength after surviving destructive pressures of Soviet totalitarianism. For decades, the communist machine has worked to fragment national communities and replace “from above” national identities with international proletarianism. Preoccupied with replicating Western-type institutional framework, neoliberals paid little or no attention to the fact that the Soviet system attempted to produce “an atomized, individualized society. . . . [Yet] far from creating a new social man, one freed from the egotistic greed, commodity fetishism and competitiveness, which had been the Marxist hope, the system created isolated, amoral, cynical individualists-without-opportunity, skilled at double-talk and trimming within the system but incapable of effective enterprise.”<sup>48</sup> Although communism was practiced across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union with varying degrees of orthodoxy and success, an unanticipated consequence of the policies to eradicate human selfishness was the almost complete annihilation of public spirit and the growth of individual egoism. The irony of neoliberal attempts to build a new society by design “from outside” was that, in the eyes of local populations, these policy measures represented a striking continuity with the Soviet totalitarian project, reinforcing feelings of atomization, alienation, and frustration with Western assistance.

The productive outcomes of new economic policies are shaped by the compliance of individuals and organizations to new rules and constraints on economic activities. Marketization measures were unsuccessful in producing a functional institutional environment. The formal market institutions frequently failed to generate individual compliance with new rules of economic behavior. Much stronger informal, noncompliant behavioral patterns, such as corruption, circumvention, and evasion remained a widespread *modus operandi*. Consequently, the lack of “successful” reform has often been blamed on the persisting legacies of socialism and the difficulties of refashioning people’s consciousness to produce individualist attitudes.

In many instances, the so-called transition indeed has been effected by the elements of its socialist past. On the other hand, there is no simple homogeneous pattern or tradition in the postsocialist world, and the fall of the Soviet bloc witnessed the revival of many of the pre-Soviet traditions. Neoliberal economists

were not that wrong in anticipating that the removal of economic and political impediments to the natural expression and articulation of individual interests would produce a spontaneous proliferation of market activity. Indeed, liberalization opened the way for many individuals to exercise personal initiative, challenging the arguments of some Western academics who denied that the human capital is unsuited to the requirements of market economy. Besides, a whole new generation arose whose attitudes were unaffected by the socialist past. The neoliberals have failed to take into account the nature of their activity. Given the pressures and constraints from the state in the absence of stable legal regulations, much of this activity has been exercised either abroad or in the “shadow.” Civil society, in a strictly Western economic sense, often failed to emerge in Eastern European and the former Soviet countries. In many instances, neoliberal policies ended up replicating some of the familiar practices from the Soviet times and became ends in themselves, rather than means to create a new type of society and individual.

As a result, contemporary relationships between the state and civil society in Eastern Europe bear a close resemblance to those that existed during the communist era, when under state pressure, many people looked for an authentic civil society in “internal emigration”<sup>49</sup>—a closed circle of family, friends, church, criminal groups, and others. Civil societies in many Eastern European countries remain weak, passive, atomized, and demobilized. Instead of counterbalancing the state, Eastern European society has traditionally retreated to protecting itself from the state. Civic activity was reduced to regular participation in highly manipulated elections. Protracted economic crisis and social insecurity produced civic apathy, and mere references to democratic ideals invoked skepticism and irritation.

### Conclusions

The analysis of transformational processes from the perspective of civil society suggests that social change unfolds as a *longue duree* process, where new institutional arrangements, whether economic or democratic, are embodied, incorporated, sustained, and reformed through continuously recreated traditions and patterns of behavior. Socialist legacies, traditional beliefs, and social images shared by the members of postsocialist societies constitute an organized social activity and the foundation of social life. They facilitate or constrain what the members of society think and how they act and are (re)created in these actions and intersubjective beliefs. At the same time, local traditions in theoretical conceptualizations on social reality can be viewed as an integral part of this reality, and they most adequately capture its focal points. Therefore, their prescriptive, policy-oriented speculations should be taken seriously when designing reform measures pertinent to this specific social reality.

The philosophical idea of civil society was revived as a political slogan and theoretic concept during the radical transformations in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, challenging both social policy and social theory. Undeniably, the concept of civil society deserves the rapidly growing body of literature, as it provides a

perspective from which critical analysis of transitional processes should be undertaken. A careful examination of the voluminous collection of works on civil society reveals significant differences in Eastern European and Western traditions of conceptualizing civil society. Whereas Eastern European theorizing tends to strongly accentuate and advocate the communitarian foundation of social life in their societies, Western concepts of civil society heavily rely on and promote individualism.

Developmental aid and transitional reforms were designed without true appreciation for local, culturally specific visions and concepts of civil society. Instead of assisting in *reforming* postsocialist societies, Western donors were primarily concerned with *remaking* them.

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***“Development of new institutions is a continuous process of dealing with subjectivity, ideas, concepts, traditions, and values.”***

Focusing solely on replicating the Western institutional framework, they overlooked some of the “original,” typically Eastern European expressions of civil society. Ironically, neoliberal policies aimed at building a new liberal-democratic social order failed to determine the interactive practices built on tolerance and trust, which are

necessary to making these institutions work. Rather, the excessive accentuation of individualism ended up eroding the fragile sense of communal solidarity; and in this sense, it was remarkably continuous with Soviet totalitarian policies directed at deliberate fragmentation and atomization of national identities.

Any transfer of developmental models without true appreciation for and understanding of cultural context is an inherently troublesome enterprise, and one almost necessarily doomed to fail. Development of new institutions is more than a technical activity. It is a continuous process of dealing with subjectivity, ideas, concepts, traditions, and values.

## NOTES

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concept of civil society to reenter political and academic debates. It is not surprising that the concept of civil society provides a perspective from which critical analysis of transitional processes can and should be undertaken. The subject is of great importance in view of the rapidly growing awareness that a "healthy" civil society stands as a key for democratic stability as well as effective economic institutions.Â relation to and in the context of civil society, the conceptualizing on this subject matter shifted from philosophical and theoretical realms to a more prescriptive and policy-oriented domain. The purpose of this article is twofold.