



ATLANTIC MEMO #47

## ***How Central and Eastern Europe Can Grow a Strong Civil Society***

Atlantic Community members agree that civil society in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has yet to reach its full potential. In order for it to develop, the region must overcome its volatile political past through consistent education and youth engagement over the next generation; civil society in CEE must also continue to hold governments accountable and achieve impartiality through fiscal independence from the state; finally, there must be a mentality of innovation, both in the business sense, and also how we understand civil society in relation to its broader functions.

### **1. CEE's volatile past can be overcome through youth engagement.**

Over the last century, CEE has undergone political change from monarchy, to communism, and now to democracy (Ivanov, Sendhardt). Our authors have seen first-hand the legacy of this tumultuous past and its impact on civil society. Most damaging has been the effect of communist rule on the region, which prevented freedom of assembly and decimated the intelligentsia in many CEE countries in the immediate postwar years (Balla & Ivanov). In many instances, this legacy has resulted in a fractured society, where personal and societal values are undefined, motivation is low, and economic activity lacking. To overcome this situation, there must be a community-driven initiative to develop educational programs in the form of learning centers and business incubators for the region's youth. This will stem the apathy that exists among young people, and provide them with the skills and community ties that will serve as a foundation for a stronger civil society in the future (Cornovan).

### **2. Independent funding will allow civil society to more effectively hold governments to account.**

Our authors agree that a major function of NGOs in society is holding governments accountable to their citizens (esp. Ivanov, Grigoryan). Though it is important to recognize the risk to institutional stability if NGOs attempt to act politically in a way that undermines democratic principles (Ghiavadvala), most civil society actors in CEE are peaceful and can provide much-needed oversight and monitoring of state activity. Functional and financial independence from government institutions is critical to this function but poses a challenge in CEE, where a legacy of state-funding for civil society remains ingrained (Balla, Ivanov). Recent crisis-induced cuts to public funding should be embraced as an impetus for civil society to break away from state ties and establish fiscal independence; NGOs should seek private capital by offering business an attractive return on investment, namely improvements in government regulations and transparency (Balla).

### **3. Civil society growth in CEE requires innovation and open mindedness.**

Advocates of an active civil society who wish to encourage its growth in CEE must approach the issue with an open mind and a flexible understanding of what civil society entails. Not only formal NGOs and advocacy groups are worthy of our attention, but also the informal and spontaneous types of civic engagement which have a long and successful history in the region (Sendhardt). The allocation of project-based funding would also benefit from such a flexible mindset. Be they from private or state sources, funds for civil society initiatives must encourage innovation, keeping guidelines and legal framework to a minimum (Metchkin). By focusing on innovation, sponsors of civil society programming can ensure that it develops organically to provide the best possible solutions to the region's social problems and succeeds in overcoming the challenges unique to the CEE region. Transparency and openness are critical for the legitimacy of this approach.

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