

Research objective

The aim of this international project is to examine the conditions of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe almost thirty years after the collapse of communism (1989-1991). Three decades of political, economic and social development in the region provide a good time framework to look again at the relationship between civil society, democracy and democratization as well and to address the challenges that civil society actors are facing today. Empirical research will be conducted in seven case countries chosen for analysis (Poland, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Russia) which present different levels of political development (in terms of the advancement of democratization processes and democratic consolidation) and economic development (membership in the EU or the lack of such a prospect). The project will combine theoretical and empirical perspective and will utilize several methods of social science research (both qualitative and quantitative) in order to examine different functions played by varied forms of civic activities as well as popular attitudes toward civil society in case countries and the relationship between civil society and the state. Popular perceptions of civic involvement and NGOs throughout the region have been influenced by, and in turn influence, political culture, levels of participation, social capital and political education. Societies in the region differ in terms of their political cultures and levels of civic development, but they all demonstrate today a significant level of social apathy and distrust of civil society, and particularly of international and transnational groups which so far were involved in democracy promotion in the region. Another important reason to undertake this project is the new dynamic of civic activities and the rise of new types of grassroots initiatives and social movements in CEE.

One of the main research questions that the project addresses is the following: What factors influence the strength or weakness of civil society and its democracy-building potential in post-transformation countries of the region? This project goes beyond the popular genetic explanation of the weakness of civil society in CEE which argues that one of the main factors explaining levels of civic development is post-communist legacy and applies a wider multidimensional and comparative perspective.

Significance of the project

The main reason to undertake this project is to open a new stage of research on civil society in CEE in post-transformation period and to utilize new empirical data for a better understanding of the current conditions and challenges of civil societies in the region. A key goal of the project is to use new theoretical conceptions and novel, rich and cross-national evidence to try to reconceptualise the relationship between civil society, democracy and democratization. This goal is furthered by the study's diverse cases, which highlight dynamics in three different groups of societies in the region. Three foreign partners (from University of Nebraska-Lincoln, College of William and Mary and University of British Columbia) who will participate in the project have significant research experience and expertise in civil society organizations in several CEE countries. Together we will be able to apply several research methods and perspectives in order to pursue common research goals. The starting point of international collaboration is a common research framework and hypotheses and its major end-result will be shared data analysis and consultations as well as shared publications that will include a co-authored monograph and a special issue of an international journal as well as conference presentations. The project will also create a much-needed cross-national survey on attitudes toward civil society, activism, and nongovernmental organizations that will be available to the public. Its comparative perspective will allow for a major contribution to the field as it will focus on qualitative analysis of civil societies participation in shaping social and political reality in CEE, their potential and future prospects. The results of empirical research (surveys, focus groups and interviews) will be consulted with expert scholars and practitioners and the expected results of the project will not only contribute to the development of research on civil society, but will also stimulate the still too rare dialogue among scholars of and practitioners in civil society.