



Civil Society Proxies Expressing Political Preferences: the cases of Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine

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Problem Summary

- Political parties / party systems have failed to take effective root in much of the former Soviet Union
- Role of civil society as proxy for expressing political preferences has become an important element of the fabric of democracy
- Examine reasons behind lack of political party system rooting, despite nearly three decades of international assistance
- Specific cases of Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine to draw lessons on how civil society can effectively play this role
- Draw a number of conclusions for greater transparency and accountability, both in the post-Soviet region and beyond.



The Failure of Political Parties

- Former Soviet Union has seen quite variable experience with development of political parties and political party systems
- Elites continue to dominate party structures and agendas; personalistic vehicles for individual/elites in capturing the state
- They often engineer systems that favour one political party or grouping, capturing apparatus, co-opting new generation
- Remain fluid and amorphous units, often devoid of programmatic content / ideological basis
- They shift frequently as political alliances and groupings change



Role of Civil Society

- To some degree, civil society organizations (CSOs) have filled the role that political parties traditionally play
- They raise issues and concerns to the national agenda
- Research and raise profile of certain areas of political life
- Maintain dialogue between as least some part of citizenry and political elites that purport to represent them



Structuring Benefits

- CSOs can offer issue-structuring under conditions of weak political parties and systems
- Alternative mechanism to channel particular voter interests:
 - Constitutional, legal and electoral system reform
 - Anti-corruption / prevention of abuse of state resources
 - Wider respect for political and human rights
- Civil society as conduit between average citizens and political elite
- Transnational context of CSO cooperation and information sharing



Three Case Studies

- Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine have arguably made significant steps in democratic development, cases particularly instructive
- Examine what assistance providers term ‘vibrant civil society’
- They continue to maintain this characteristic, even in face of political capture and, to some extent, return to one-party states (esp. GEO and KGZ)



Georgia

- Examples: ISFED, TI and the Georgian Young Lawyers Association
- They have been around since early/mid-90s
- Main focus has been on domestic observation of elections, but also legal / electoral framework reform
- Are considered experts in their own right and often drive the agenda in terms of reforms necessary
- Have been instrumental in working with EMBs to achieve fundamental reforms that have resulted in real change
- Increasingly entering public and political life and bringing their good practice and rigorous approach with them



Kyrgyzstan

- Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society and Bir Duino Kyrgyzstan, (Citizens Against Corruption)
- Fundamentally involved in legal / electoral reform, but also anti-corruption/transparency on more fundamental human rights
- They inform the population in terms of political and civic rights
- Also increase public demand that the political parties respect and further these goals



Ukraine

- OPORA and previous CVU have been key in furthering fundamental reforms and have developed real relationships with key politicians
- This allows them to use political party channels, especially in the *Verkhovna Rada*, to push for reforms and sometimes to introduce legislative initiatives through supporting deputies
- They have also increasingly become involved in investigating, monitoring and reporting on corruption issues
- This has caused a demand by much of the public for greater transparency and accountability



CSO Main Tools

- Monitoring – have extensive networks countrywide and in most regions, often difficult to reach for internationals
- Reporting – based on solid and transparent methodologies that are data based
- Advocacy – based on this cohesive monitoring and reporting, public statements, parliamentary commissions, expert input
- International exchange and good practice sharing – esp. within the region, but also trans-regionally through networks like GNDEM



Cross-Over

- Cross-over between civil society and political elites
- Not always been constructive. For instance, former heads of CSOs in KGZ and UKR have sought political careers, but this has made them less effective rather than more so
- Often co-opted by political system and able to achieve less in their roles as political party members / leaders than they did as heads of their respective civil society organizations
- But sometimes provide access to former colleagues to raise initiatives that would otherwise not see light of day



IFES Programming

- IFES exploring civic education, democracy camps, grassroots advocacy programs to encourage engagement of young citizens
- KGZ - Summer Democracy Camps, aimed at improving critical thinking and democratic values through interactive group activities
- GEO - 28 universities participate in IFES-designed Democracy and Citizenship course and extracurricular civic education activities
- UKR - supporting activities to improve civic education with first training session in innovative civic education course “Democracy: from Theory to Practice”, which will be piloted in 2018-2019



Conclusions

- While limited to certain spaces, CSOs have taken on key facets of the traditional role of political parties in terms of shaping the political discourse and driving reform on key agenda topics
- Often work in such a way that political parties must respond or face the ire of the public or at least publicly explain why they are not doing more
- Although perhaps not the envisaged vehicle for shaping and transmitting voter preferences in the traditional sense, CSOs in some post-Communist countries have been effectively able to open a political space that has key impact on policy formation and legislative reform



Conclusions II

- CSO success seen as clear threat by neighbouring autocratic systems
- Examples of civic engagement lead to more restrictive or draconian policies in Russia, (most) Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Belarus
- These countries have learned how to shape and control political parties, chimera's for autocratic state reflection
- But clear concern that CSO involvement might have real impact in terms of shaping citizen's demands and such activities are therefore dampened intentionally and effectively
- Organizations like IFES can help increase knowledge and effectiveness



Widening Relevance

- Although initially exported from more established democracies, CSOs may need to be re-imported back again
- Particularly with populist politics in Hungary, Poland, other EU states
- Fight against growing citizen apathy and feeling of powerlessness in systems that offer only limited real political options
- CSOs frontline in resisting autocratic norms being introduced, protesting undermining of judicial independence (Poland), government erosion of media freedom (Slovakia), or migrant rights (Hungary)
- Grassroots engagement gives citizens renewed sense of empowerment, able to shape and influence political agendas, effect real change
- Can present some counter-balance against emerging populist norms



Questions?