

From the “Civil Sector” to Civil Society?

Progress and Prospects

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1. Introduction

The Dayton Peace Agreement of 14 December 1995 formally ended the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). In this Agreement, as in other subsequent national and international documents relating to BiH’s reconstruction and political future, the development of civil society is identified as a key strategic objective.

As early as 1989, various forms of civic activity began to evolve in Bosnia-Herzegovina; at the same time, the interest-based associations dating back to the socialist self-management system collapsed and largely vanished from public life. During the war (1992–1995), numerous international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) began operating in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the concept of “civil society” gained in popularity, prompting the emergence of a number of local organisations. According to the Local Democracy Agency in Tuzla, a total of 8,000 NGOs were officially registered as “humanitarian organisations”¹ in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the period 1992–2001, and around 30,000 projects addressing a range of social issues – democratisation, human rights, women’s rights, youth work, intercultural communication, political education, the environment, and conflict management – were initiated (Grupa autora 2002a:5). In the developed democracies, NGOs are just one of the pillars of civil society alongside citizens’ action groups, the independent media and the critical public, but in Bosnia-Herzegovina, they are its dominant component.

The purpose of this article is to describe the current stage of development of a civil sector in BiH and to define its role in the democratisation process. BiH is currently undergoing a multidimensional process of transformation. Firstly, it

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¹ Local branches of international/foreign NGOs, subsidiaries of foreign NGOs, and local groups were registered as humanitarian organisations.

must make the transition from war to peace and from socialism to parliamentary democracy. Secondly, economic adjustments are required. How, and to what extent, can civil society approaches help to promote social change in BiH? To answer this question, the following issues must be explored:

- How can the emergence of a civil society in transitional societies be defined in theoretical terms?
- What are the historical starting points for a civil society in BiH?
- Which functional components of civil society can currently be identified?
- How can they be classified?
- Who are the civil society actors in BiH, and which problems do they face?
- Is there any evidence that a functioning civil society already exists in BiH?
- Which adjustments are necessary to open up further prospects for the development of civil society?

2. The Dynamic Concept of Civil Society and its Functions in Bosnia-Herzegovina

In any discussion of civil society, it is essential – for the avoidance of misunderstandings – to begin by defining terminology. This article is based on a dynamic understanding of civil society, as presented in a study by Wolfgang Merkel and Hans Joachim Lauth (Merkel/Lauth 1998). They compare various concepts and conclude that the term “civil society” relates to a third sphere between the state and its institutions, on the one hand, and the citizen and his/her private activities, on the other. Merkel and Lauth identify a total of six key functions of civil society:

- protecting against the state’s encroachment on the private sphere, and therefore safeguarding a private and a social space
- monitoring and controlling state power
- encouraging the democratic and participatory socialisation of citizens and the recruitment of democratic elites for the state’s decision-making bodies
- opening up channels for the development, aggregation and articulation of common values and social interests outside the political parties and parliaments
- contributing to local democracy-building, which in fledgling democracies often lags behind democratic development at national level
- encouraging overlaps in the membership of civil society groups and organisations, initiatives and movements in order to help ameliorate or overcome entrenched lines of conflict within society.

Studies undertaken in the field of transition research which examine the systemic transformation from authoritarian to democratic systems have revealed that civil societies have adaptive capacities and are context-dependent. Merkel and Lauth therefore propose an open-ended concept depicting civil societies as historical phenomena undergoing a constant transformation of their form and functions. Our aim is not to categorise civil society in Bosnia-Herzegovina in terms of an existing definition or assign it predetermined functions at all costs. Our intention is to identify the *specific functions and problems* facing BiH's fledgling civil society in order to answer the following question: how important are civil society approaches in establishing and consolidating democracy in BiH?

2.1. Controlling and Corrective Functions

In the last two years in particular, the number of NGOs exclusively concerned with monitoring and critically scrutinising the authorities and their work has increased substantially in BiH. In the Bosnian media, they are known as “political NGOs”. Their purpose is not to assume political power but to scrutinise its use, primarily by monitoring the actions of the authorities. These organisations include the citizens’ forums which have developed at the local level. One of the best-known was set up in Tuzla as early as 1993. Similar forums are now active in 31 municipalities, but are not interlinked. They have no formal membership or structure. They scrutinise the work of the municipal authorities and – by raising awareness, issuing press releases or sponsoring poster campaigns – attempt to mobilise citizens “for” or “against” specific decisions being adopted by the authorities and encourage them to develop alternative solutions.

There are other organisations which specialise in social issues and the protection of civil rights, or in youth work, environmental issues and ecology. As a rule, their activities have a local political focus. By attempting to mobilise a broader public beyond their own members, these civil society organisations are contributing to the development of a critical public in BiH, especially at local level. This is a prerequisite for the formation of genuine citizens’ initiatives, which may arise informally or spontaneously. With the rights to set up a citizens’ initiative and hold referenda on political issues now enshrined in law, the general political conditions have become more conducive to civic activity.

In 2000, citizen groups in Tuzla, Bihac, Bijeljina and Sarajevo municipalities began to exert pressure on the political level in order to achieve greater transparency in decision-making. They were ultimately successful in securing a right for groups of observers – delegated by non-governmental organisations – to attend the local council meetings. These are significant steps for local democracy-building and, indeed, for the development of civil society as a whole.


In June 2003, the Centre for Civil Initiatives (CCI), an NGO with branches in ten Bosnian municipalities, ran a project to monitor and critically review the work of the cantonal parliament in Tuzla. 28 NGOs from Tuzla canton later joined the project. In the cantonal parliament itself, a “Commission on cooperation with the civil sector” was established – an innovative step in BiH. One of CCI’s most important tasks is election monitoring, starting with the 1998 general elections. At CCI’s initiative, an election monitoring network, known as *Oko* (The Eye) was set up; it now has more than 310 members across the country. At the general (parliamentary) elections in October 2002, 9,000 trained volunteers were deployed in 2,600 polling stations. The subsequent analyses of the conduct of the election were based on their observations and prompted an initiative to reform BiH’s electoral law.

Besides these organisations, which aim to exercise general control functions over official politics and thus democratise and reform political culture, other associations have been set up as lobby groups and have started to exert influence on specific policy areas. In December 2003, for example, an informal group of agricultural organisations voiced vehement criticism of the Bosnian Government’s agricultural policies and organised mass protests by farmers across the country in order to secure higher prices for their products. This was a form of “interest politics” by a specific occupational group which brought together farmers from all over BiH in a protest transcending ethnopolitical divisions – a novelty in Bosnian post-war history (Grupa autora 2003a).

2.2. Participation

The participation function evolves from the control function. It includes direct participation by civil sector representatives in the framing of legislative proposals and other provisions and decisions. This form of participation is already taking place at local level in a small number of municipalities.

Some non-governmental organisations are drafting their own legislative proposals which they submit to the legislatures via the political parties or individual members of parliament. This process has been used to frame important items of legislation which directly relate to the civil sector itself, such as the Law on Foundations and Associations, the Law on Local Self-Government, the Law on Referenda, the Law on Citizens’ Initiatives, and the Law on Civilian Victims of War. From an early stage in their activities, some Bosnian NGOs began to utilise this function in an attempt to increase their own influence over legislation. In doing so, they were guided by models from Western countries or successful solutions adopted in other transition states (Agic 1998:18).



The reintroduction of the legal right to hold a referendum and establish citizens' initiatives is a major step forward for political participation by NGOs and democracy-building in BiH. In the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (FBiH) the right to hold a referendum is regulated by the cantonal constitutions. A referendum may be held if at least 3,000 signatures are collected from citizens in support of a referendum. Implementation is a matter for the local councils. These instruments are intended to facilitate broader participation by citizens in civil society processes. Partnerships between the civil sector and the state generally develop in two ways: either the government authorities look for sponsors, co-sponsors or implementing agencies for specific civil sector projects, or the organisations themselves contact the authorities and offer to cooperate on particular issues.

As NGOs are not financially dependent on the public budget, they are able to cooperate with the state on the basis of partnership and equality. Unfortunately, however, the necessary coordination is generally lacking, leading to inefficient use of human and financial resources. Reconstruction is the only area where there is some degree of coordination between the state and the non-governmental levels in BiH. However, this area of work tends to be dominated by foreign agencies and NGOs, which get involved via government agencies; the genuine local civil sector is usually excluded from these activities. In early 2002, a group of NGOs in Cazin municipality launched an initiative to draft a development strategy for the civil sector in BiH. The document which was produced highlights the need to involve the local civil sector and prioritise participation by citizens and local NGOs in reconstruction activities.

2.3. Service and Substitution Functions

These functions are most apparent in relation to social issues, e.g. projects which aim to alleviate the problems of refugees and displaced persons, pensioners, war veterans, young people and women, or which relate to the general legal protection of citizens. In all these areas, NGOs provide a range of services which were formerly delivered by the public sector. They include:

- legal aid and legal protection for citizens
- accommodation, transport and technical services for at-risk groups
- health services (e.g. drug counselling)
- psychosocial support and services for traumatised persons
- protection and support for women
- child protection
- protection and advice for war victims
- income-generation measures and training for business start-ups

- agricultural advice
- mine clearing, etc.

The services provided by “umbrella organisations” form a further category. These agencies provide organisational support to other NGOs operating within the civil sector or supply them with information/training on key issues relating to their sphere of activity.

2.4. Formation of a Civil Public

A number of NGOs in BiH focus on interethnic understanding and cooperation. Opinions vary on whether these initiatives have any real impact. The staff of the NGOs concerned are generally keen to highlight the importance and positive outcomes of their work. Many of them measure their success in terms of the large numbers of citizens – from all ethnic backgrounds – who participate in their programmes. However, Asad Nuhanovic suspects that these activities only have an impact within the civil sector itself, as they merely involve civil society actors and their limited public (Nuhanovic 2002:92). At present, there are no studies available which could be used for a definitive assessment of the macro-level social impacts of interethnic activities in BiH. However, it can be assumed that the emergence of the civil sector has created the core of a “civil public” as an important counterweight to the latently ethnicised general public and the otherwise ethnicised partial publics across the country (Nuhanovic 2002:92). Most Bosnian NGOs are pro-actively engaged in public relations work. In 2003, for example, youth organisations produced 22 publications for young people, printed and distributed 35 brochures, and circulated tens of thousands of posters across the country to inform the public about their work. Nonetheless, it may be assumed these efforts attract very little attention outside the civil sector; at best, they reach the public at local level.

2.5. Social Tasks and Protecting the Needy

Numerous local NGOs focus on the social integration of marginalised groups. A conservative society, poverty and lack of training prevent members of specific groups from participating normally in society. These groups include persons with health or psychological problems, the disabled, veterans, gays and lesbians, or women who are disabled and traumatised by war and violence.

Various local associations and subsidiaries of international NGOs work with the mentally ill, the disabled, and children with health or developmental problems; others are involved in drug prevention and the resocialisation of ex-addicts. Some organisations are engaged in lobbying to promote the rights of

national minorities, while others deal with the problems faced by women who are victims of domestic violence. All these organisations aim to improve conditions for their target groups and help them assert their rights.

There are also many organisations which deal with health issues and run anti-drug, anti-alcohol and anti-smoking campaigns. Some organisations focus on protecting women who have suffered violence and who cannot articulate their problems in public. In the Tuzla and Bihac expert group, as well as in 11 other municipalities across the country, the NGO *Viva zene* provides woman-centred services such as accommodation, medical treatment and job opportunities. (*On this topic, see the article on trauma work by Monika Kleck in this book.*)

Various NGOs lobby on behalf of national minorities (Roma, Slovenes, Germans, etc.).² In many cases, they also organise cultural activities in conjunction with these ethnic groups (for more details, see Grupa autora 2003c).

Disabled persons' organisations have achieved major successes. For example, thanks to lobbying by local organisations representing disabled ex-combatants and the Tuzla expert group, all the public institutions in Tuzla municipality now offer access and facilities for the disabled. In a country with around 80,000 disabled persons (including many ex-combatants according to Grupa autora 2002a), these measures are a prerequisite for social inclusion.

Some authors subsume these functions within “democratisation” and simply regard them as a contribution to “the consolidation of relations between ethnic groups and peace-building” (Atajic 2002:115). However, this does not accurately reflect reality. In order to appreciate the importance of the civil sector for Bosnian society, the way in which these organisations work must be examined in more detail.

3. Problems Facing the Civil Sector in Bosnia-Herzegovina

3.1. The Ethnopoliticisation of Social Structures

Although it is now ten years since the war ended, the strong trend towards ethnopolitical segregation is still a key feature of BiH society. “Everything – from the greeting you use to the dialect you speak and the newspaper in your coat pocket – is judged, commented upon and categorised in terms of an omnipresent, mysticised ‘ethnicity’. Under such circumstances, defining oneself as a citizen of the BiH state is tantamount to a betrayal of one’s national identity”, notes Ramo Atajic with reference to BiH reality (Atajic 2002:118).

² Prnjavor municipality in Central Bosnia, for instance, is home to 19 national minorities.

Zorica Savic (2003) shows that the multiethnic programmes run by the civil sector and based on citizens' interests are often incompatible with the monodimensional ethnopolitics pursued by state actors and institutions. According to Savic, there is no understanding of, or scope for, partnerships in this context. One factor making it more difficult to undertake joint activities in cooperation with the local authorities or other public institutions is that they require the number of Bosnians, Serbs or Croats participating in the activities to be monitored constantly. The author cites 14 cases in which projects providing support for returnees to BiH were shelved because the local authorities actively obstructed these activities. The explanation given for their blockading tactics was that there was an ethnic imbalance in the distribution of funds. Six of these projects focused on reconstructing homes for returning refugees, three provided democracy training for young people in village communities, three were agricultural development projects, and two were micro-credit schemes (Savic 2003:23). The trend towards ethnopoliticisation not only influences the political institutions; it also impacts on the economic sphere and overlaps into civil sector bodies such as sports and cultural organisations.

Gajo Sekulic (2002), a professor in the Philosophy Faculty at the University of Sarajevo, believes that cooperation or partnership on the basis of equality between the civil sector and the government elites in BiH is impossible due to the latter's nationalist attitudes. In his view, "ethnopolitical" and "civic" concepts of society are incompatible. Granting civil society scope for action is a risky business for nationalist elites, who fear that this will jeopardise their control over the economy, the media and the general public. Sekulic therefore argues that ethnopolitics is, by definition, opposed to the development of a civil society. He believes that nationalists seek to redefine the liberal-democratic concept by encouraging ethnopolitically motivated action in spheres which are usually the individual's domain. This ethnicised approach to politics manipulates the attitudes of ordinary citizens and thus creates an obstacle which civil society must constantly overcome. Citizens can only be won over to multiethnic activities if ethnopolitical thought patterns are dismantled first of all. Training citizens in tolerance and encouraging a pluralistic approach are therefore key challenges in developing a civil society.

The experiences of many NGO staff confirm this thesis. Bosnian citizens are initially very mistrustful of the programmes and activities run by civil society organisations. However, the problem is manifested in different ways in the towns and the rural regions of BiH respectively. In the larger urban centres such as Tuzla, Sarajevo or Banja Luka, where the population has traditionally been more ethnically mixed, citizens are more flexible and show greater willingness to

cooperate with civil society initiatives. This was borne out by a study undertaken by the Centre for Civil Initiatives in 2003, which explored public participation in civil sector activities. With the support of the *Oko* network, the survey was undertaken simultaneously in Tuzla (FBiH) and Banja Luka (RS), i.e. two major urban centres with a mixed population, and in Prnjavor (RS) and Kakanj (FBiH), two ethnically homogeneous communities, each with a population of around 30,000. 4,000 citizens took part in the survey, which was carried out between 1 February and 30 June 2003 (Grupa autora 2003d).

The study produced the following findings: in Tuzla (FBiH), 51.5% of respondents were familiar with at least one NGO's work, and 32.8% had taken part in one or more activities themselves during the last five years. In Banja Luka (RS), the figures were rather lower: civil sector activities were familiar to 46.2% of respondents and 30.3% had participated in activities themselves. However, in Prnjavor (RS), only 8.8% had contacts with the civil sector, usually via reconstruction or humanitarian relief projects, and only 1.1% had participated in activities themselves. In Kakanj (FBiH), the figures are a little higher than in Prnjavor: 11% of respondents were aware of the activities, but only 4% had participated. These findings show that the influence of the civil sector progressively decreases with the shift away from the urban centres towards the periphery. They also reveal another major problem facing the civil sector in Bosnia-Herzegovina: the legitimacy of these organisations is limited and there is a low level of acceptance by society. Their dependence on support from abroad is a contributory factor here (Grupa autora 2003d).

3.2. The Legitimation Crisis of Civil Society Initiatives

Most civil society organisations operating in Bosnia-Herzegovina have developed with financial or material support from foreign sponsors, and many continue to depend on them in their work. Foreign sponsors make the disbursement of funds conditional on compliance with specific criteria. NGOs can only expect to receive funding if their work fulfils these criteria. The criteria are either set by the sponsors themselves or the sponsors employ intermediary organisations and agencies for this purpose. It would be reasonable to assume that when setting the criteria, the agency concerned would involve local stakeholders who are familiar with conditions on the ground. The best option would be to rely on up-to-date research findings as well. In most cases, however, the intermediary organisations set the criteria without familiarising themselves thoroughly with local conditions. A comprehensive study of the interests and needs of local citizens does not take place. Most sponsors do not adopt a well-designed and coherent strategy to support the civil sector. In practice, the priorities set are

often based on superficial assessments by foreign intermediaries, and local staff have no opportunity to influence the decisions taken. This creates additional problems.

The local NGOs, for their part, have to gear their work programmes towards these externally imposed criteria. As a result, key needs identified in their field of work, to which they should really respond, are given lower priority or are neglected altogether. Many initiatives operate in the space between foreign sponsors and the local civil sector. Citizens simply make use of the services supplied by these predefined projects. However, if the projects are not developed in response to social realities, the problem of legitimacy arises. The services delivered by these organisations appear to be imposed “from above” and have no relevance to the actual needs and interests of citizens.

Tensions have arisen between those projects which respond to genuine social needs and those which merely react to incentives from abroad. It is also symptomatic that in the civil sector in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the number of local organisations established is very low compared with the number of foreign organisations and their subsidiaries. Fadil Sero points out that during the period 1997–2002, the number of foreign organisations and their subsidiaries doubled several times, whereas the number of genuine local organisations rose by just 10 percent (Sero 2002:11).

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The local organisations cite funding as a major problem affecting their work. Out of a total of 200 organisations, 88% identify this as the main problem. Local grassroots organisations have the greatest difficulties in finding sponsors for their activities. Their priorities and programmes often do not meet the funding criteria, which are set by actors outside BiH society (Terzić 2002:180). An absurd situation arises: organisations with strong socially based legitimacy often end up with no financial support. To sum up: international and foreign sponsors have not yet acquired an adequate insight into the development of the local civil sector.

3.3. “Projectomania” and the “Colonisation of the Civil Sector”

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, people working in civil society organisations who analyse developments in this sector often talk about “projectomania”. The term denotes an uncritical attitude by NGOs whose entire programme of activities revolves around project funding, and whose priority is to develop projects that focus on compliance with the sponsors’ criteria, often without considering their practical relevance and viability. Novka Agić, Fadil Sero and Miroslav Mrdja, a group of experts who have studied developments in this area, refer to “project obsession”, caused by inappropriate funding strategies. In their view, foreign sponsors “... show no interest in allowing local organisations to undertake long-

term projects; instead, they constantly force them to devise new projects over ever-shorter timeframes and submit new “funding applications”. This is followed by a phase of endless report-writing and evaluations, with hundreds of pages being compiled about the different types of application, then the report-writing starts again ...”. Some organisations in the civil sector “have moved into offices, i.e. into the “virtual project” world which operates in an artificial framework between applicants and sponsors” (Grupa autora 1998:38).

These organisations, argues Gajo Sekulic, “are merely a surrogate civil society ... the problem is that their projects lack any social legitimacy. What has emerged is a separate, isolated segment of civil sector which could jeopardise the development of an authentic civil society in BiH. The participation of citizens – who should be the defining feature of a civil society – is called into question” (Grupa autora 1998:42).

A further contributory factor to “projectomania” is that jobs in the non-governmental organisations are very well-paid by BiH standards. This applies especially to foreign NGOs, as well as to some of their local subsidiaries. Unfortunately, the impacts of this phenomenon have not yet been studied in detail, so there are no precise figures available which could confirm this in a wider context. The work of the Tuzla expert group highlights some of the negative aspects of “projectomania”. This group aims to improve coordination among the Bosnian organisations in order to avoid project duplication. By devising priorities within the framework of a joint development strategy and presenting them to the public and potential sponsors, it attempts to counteract these trends.

Some authors go even further in their criticism, claiming that part of civil society in BiH has been “colonised” by international actors. This view is endorsed by Bosnian and foreign social scientists alike. Paul Stubbs defines this “colonisation” as “an asymmetry based on an unequal distribution of symbolic and financial power between two categories of actors” within the civil sector in BiH (Grupa autora 1998:36; Stubbs, cited in: Grupa autora 2003b:61-62). According to Stubbs, this asymmetry “leads to outcomes which reinforce the dominance of international actors, their frameworks, assumptions, meanings and practices. As such, these outcomes may be inappropriate to the specific socio-political and socio-cultural context of a particular society, and implicitly or explicitly, patronising, demeaning and even insulting to local actors” (ibid.). In BiH’s civil sector, this problem is also described as the “colonisation of the civil sector”.

This problem is especially apparent when one foreign organisation acts both as the sponsor (based abroad) and the intermediary organisation and

implementing agency for programmes in BiH. Sevima Terzic cites the example of *Kvinna till Kvinna* (KTK), a Swedish NGO which secured substantial sums of money from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) to develop women's organisations in BiH. The funds were to be disbursed to other NGOs specialising in this target group. Yet the KTK branch in BiH received 80% of the total amount. The same organisation therefore acts as both the transmitting and the implementing agency. The local civil sector is almost always excluded from this chain of activities. Sevima Terzic cites three other similar examples (Terzic 2002:180). This author also points out that "prospective applicants were required to meet criteria which local organisations cannot fulfil. In this way, colonisation of the civil sector is legalised" (Terzic 2002:183). It is hardly surprising that this approach triggers negative reactions among local stakeholders and causes tensions between local and foreign organisations.

It is probably an exaggeration to refer to "colonisation" of the civil sector in BiH. Nonetheless, there is a clear trend in this direction, and it is essential to take this threat seriously. If this trend becomes entrenched or continues over a longer period, a conflict situation between the privileged foreign organisations and the largely neglected local organisations cannot be ruled out. In such a situation, there is a risk that relations between local and international civil organisations will become problematical, impeding the development of a genuine civil society in BiH.

4. The Importance of the Civil Sector in BiH's Democratisation Process

The international community has invested substantial sums of money in developing a civil sector in BiH. As in the other post-socialist countries, the international community's intervention has focused primarily on supporting three elements which are regarded as crucially important for democratic development: 1) free elections, 2) institution-building, and 3) promoting civil society (Carothers 1999:6). It is emphasised, in this context, that "civil society is the force that makes politicians and state authorities accountable and is the basis for the establishment of a genuine democratic culture" (ibid.).

Unfortunately, no detailed studies presenting relevant empirical data exist at present. This makes it more difficult to measure the tangible outcomes of the civil sector's activities in BiH. Nonetheless, there is a fairly clear picture of the structure and functions of the civil sector and an overview of the major

problems affecting its further development. One of the key challenges is to create incentives for citizens' involvement in civic activity and free them from the burden of ethnicised politics. This is crucially important for the future of BiH and its democratic development. In this context, citizens' needs should become the priority in, and the focus of, foreign sponsors' funding activities.

The international community's insistence on multiethnicity in many areas of activity has a genuine purpose and its positive impacts are apparent. The fact remains that despite all the problems outlined above, there is now a sphere of society – namely the civil sector – in which the citizen, i.e. the individual, can articulate his/her ideas and interests regardless of ethnicity. This is a vital element in supporting the democratisation process. By contrast, the political system in BiH is still based on ethnic principles. Its political institutions are geared towards the principle of national consensus and are often incapable of adopting decisions that are crucial for citizens and for BiH's economic and social development. Sometimes, this borders on the absurd when the activities of government institutions descend into banality, e.g. if members of nationalist parties are unable to agree on the colour of passports or the words of the national anthem.

Without the legal authority and sanction mechanisms conferred upon the High Representative by the international community under the Dayton Peace Agreement, BiH's government, parliaments and authorities would be unable to establish the legislative basis for the efficient functioning of the BiH state. The most important legislation (e.g. electoral law, customs legislation, defence, etc.) and the official symbols of the Bosnian state were all developed by the Office of the High Representative. It is no exaggeration to refer to a "semi-protectorate" in BiH.

Since the end of the war, the multiethnic political parties have only managed to exert any real influence in the state institutions for a short period, i.e. from 2000–2002. Since then, politics in BiH have been dominated by the nationalist parties. Smaller multiethnic parties tend to focus primarily on local problems. The only organisations which can take on the nationalist forces and whose activities transcend inter-entity borders and ethnic divisions are the NGOs. Despite all the problems affecting the development of the civil sector, described above, their multiethnic approach is extremely important, proving that even in BiH there are those who support a pluralistic concept of society.

At local level, especially in larger urban centres, citizens' initiatives have shown that they are able to take on a controlling and corrective function and influence the reform of social structures. The overhaul of electoral law in 2004 was a major success. As a result of this reform, all the mayors throughout BiH

will henceforth be directly elected by citizens. The candidates will no longer be nominated solely by the political parties; they can now also be proposed by citizens' groups. This is an important step in local democracy-building in BiH. The *Oko* network, which regularly monitors elections, is currently preparing a campaign to lobby for further amendments to electoral law, including a provision that the three members of the state presidency will be directly elected in future. These are difficult first steps in the democratisation process, and the successes achieved, although apparently modest, should not be underestimated.

The civil sector is a core element of society which aims to assert universally binding democratic values, experiences and principles. These include the principle of multiethnicity and interethnic tolerance, the principle of transparency in decision-making, and the principle of decision-making by democratic majority – which requires citizens to organise themselves in accordance with their shared interests – instead of “national consensus”, i.e. ethnicity.

In the civil sector, various efforts are already being made, through training measures and via the media, to embed these values and principles in society and secure their endorsement by a wider public. The first democracy training programmes were developed and launched at the end of the 1990s. However, progress in this area has been blocked by the NGOs' uneven geographical distribution (most of them are located in the towns, while the rural regions are still neglected in most cases) and by the ongoing blockading tactics deployed by ethnopoliticians. But since the 2000/2001 academic year, “Introduction to Democracy” and “Civic Education” have been included as subjects in the curriculum at middle schools (*see the article by Astrid Fischer in this book*). This is the outcome of a two-year campaign by 118 NGOs. When the next local elections take place, the first generation of voters who have undergone democracy training in the middle schools will be eligible to vote. This shows that BiH's civil sector can bring about change despite its small critical mass.

A further impediment to positive relations between the state and the civil sector are ethnopolitically orientated state structures and the ensuing obstruction of multiethnic approaches to politics. The work of NGOs is also impeded by current legislation and a general lack of resources. This situation is changing, albeit very gradually, especially in the field of social work. The social problems facing post-war Bosnia are so severe that they cannot be resolved by the public sector alone. Initial successes are being achieved in the development of a partnership between the state and the civil sector in the field of social services, for example. In this way, the civil sector is also exerting influence over the transformation of social policy.

The Independent Bureau for Humanitarian Issues (IBHI), working in

cooperation with local experts and the relevant ministries for social affairs, has prepared a study entitled “Social Protection in the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (FBiH): An Overview of the System and Policies”. The same study, using identical methodology, was also carried out in Republika Srpska. Its findings were summarised in the document “Transformation Strategies for the Social System in BiH” (Grupa autora 2002b).

The study recommended that the state should assume responsibility for coordinating activities relating to social protection, while local NGOs should provide support for the management of joint programmes. By the end of 2003, this strategy was already being implemented in 15 municipalities in the two entities. A more extensive roll-out across the country is now planned (Grupa autora 2002b:39-40). This is a good example of how the work of international NGOs, Bosnian authorities and the local civil sector can be coordinated effectively and generate synergies. The involvement of the local civil sector ensures that citizens’ needs are articulated and reflected in programme implementation. The civil sector is also assuming an increasingly important role in democracy-building. The above examples of its influence over legislation and social policy show that it is able to initiate change and address key issues before they are included on the formal political agenda.

To sum up, the civil sector’s importance in BiH’s society must not be exaggerated, but it should also not be underestimated. This sector cannot meet all the needs of the democratisation process, as this depends, first and foremost, on the development of the political system, the economy and the independent media. Nonetheless, these reform processes cannot take place without the involvement of citizens. At present, the civil sector in Bosnia-Herzegovina is the only free space in which citizens can develop ideas and initiatives and draw up proposals for political and social transformation.

This process should be carefully monitored and given targeted support by the international organisations and their civil society partners. People in Bosnia-Herzegovina must be encouraged to take the initiative themselves and bring about social transformation. Investment in unrealistic programmes which divert attention from this objective while absorbing energies that could be better spent elsewhere should be avoided. Effective measures to build a civil society should not focus solely on supporting NGO activities but must continue to be geared, at the very least, towards supporting the media and trade unions as well.

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