



Serbian Civil Society Brief

Déjà vu: Civil society within a 5-year perspective

March 14, 2008

Executive Summary

Five years ago this month, reformist Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić was assassinated. And only three months into this year, Serbia has already experienced a deluge of fundamental changes – the mass shock at Kosovan independence, a divisive set of presidential elections, the freezing of the SAP, a failure of the coalition government and the dissolution of parliament. Serbia now faces new parliamentary elections under a cloud of uncertainty surrounding not only its present, but also the focus of its entire future.

This Pontis Foundation paper, based on previous fact-finding missions and papers from 2003 – 2007, argues that the five years since Djindjić's death have marked not only a loss for Serbia, but also for its civil society. Today, civil society, traditionally a force stirring positive changes in Serbia, is exhausted, confused, introverted, divided and labelled as a traitor to the nation. Calling for social mobilization in the last decade exhausted the NGO sector and made it more difficult to develop institutionally. The current climate is highly unfavourable for NGOs which are treated as 'state enemies' if they criticize policy, meanwhile their public image has worsened. Divisions between pragmatists and essentialists continue, confounded by the lack of new strategies and visions for the future. The situation within civil society has not moved forward significantly since the events of five years ago creating a situation for observers that can only be described as *déjà vu*.

The European Union whose Commission recently adopted new Communication¹ on the Western Balkans, recognizes that civil society is a key to strengthening democracy and reconciliation in the region. By dedicating a significant portion of the IPA to NGOs, the EU has chosen a good strategy. But current turbulent political and social developments in Serbia are putting the EU to the test. It must act flexibly, rapidly and purposely, according to the needs on the ground.

From Political Hope to Despair

When Milošević was ousted from power in 2000, a general optimism and hope for Serbia's path to political and economic normality prevailed. But developments since have shown that any sense of normality is far from being achieved. The pro-European camp is dizzy and powerless, while the nationalists, looking east towards Russia, seem to have solidified its popularity further. The recent presidential elections gave the people a clear choice between

¹ "Western Balkans: Enhancing the European perspective", Communication from the [EU] Commission to the European Parliament and the Council; Brussels, March 5, 2008

a European future and that of one dominated by isolation within Europe. Although the close victory of Boris Tadić of the Democratic Party (DS) was significant, the starker choice between Europe and Russia continues to dominate Serbian politics. 74% of Serbs would never trade EU membership for an independent Kosovo², even if support for joining the EU is high. The game is clearly not over.

The inability and failure of the Serbian government to formulate a united strategy against last month's declaration of Kosovan independence has meant Prime Minister Koštunica (DSS) has been forced to call early parliamentary elections. These will be held on May 11, 2008, along with local and regional votes. It is looking increasingly likely that these elections will constitute the first time since 2000 that DSS could openly forge a government with the ever-popular Radicals; a dangerous potentiality for democrats in Serbia, for civil society and for the EU.

Tadić's victory was in part, due to the mobilization and involvement of minorities, youth, and civil society organizations. But due to the nationalist take-over of Serb sentiment regarding Kosovo, pro-European groups see no political gain following Tadić's re-election. In these decisive times, it seems the pro-European camp has neither the strong political leadership, nor *civil infrastructure* to push Serbia forwards.

Civil society, then and now

When the Pontis Foundation organized assessment trips to Serbia in 2003³ to monitor developments in civil society, the trends and challenges faced by NGOs at that time were similar to today. In 2003 many pointed out that civil society centred around a very small and elite *protégé* group, with limited reach into the community. The majority of well-established and experienced NGOs were based in Belgrade, while in the regions there were mostly small, donor-driven organizations lacking any sense of the needs of local communities or the ability to redefine their strategies and roles accordingly. At that time, a need to shift support towards smaller, regional NGOs with good advocacy potential but a lack of institutional capacities was mentioned. The need to build capacities in management, planning, and the preparation of long-term strategies were proposed as possible antidotes. Cooperation with other NGOs as well as local municipalities and the business sector was viewed as a great challenge, along with the poor public image of much of civil society.

Post-Kosovan independence, the radicalisation of Serb sentiment has meant a potential deterioration in the conditions for NGOs. But Serbian civil society today is not as weak as we keep hearing from all sides, but rather more fragile than it should be, with the efforts to build it up in recent years. Challenges and obstacles have not changed in real terms since 2003. The central problems facing civil society can be summarized by the following; *exhaustion, confusion, introversion* and *division*.

"NGOs invested a lot of resources and effort in the presidential campaign, and there was no time to have a feeling of victory as Kosovo was declared independent. February 17 happened, and there was no time ...to plan various scenarios for the future", says Hedvig Morvai Horváth, director of the newly established *European Fund for the Balkans*. Due to intensive mobilization, NGOs have had less time to focus on and to develop substantial institutional bases for their operations. That is one of the reasons why many of them today, even those more established, face problems related to financial viability, human resources, managerial and organizational capacities, transparency and accountability. Exhaustion has finally set in.

² Based on poll conducted by the Politikum Agency in early February, more information at <http://balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/8286/>.

³ Monitoring trips were organized in March 2003, July 2003 and November 2003 and supported by the SlovakAid and CIDA.

Civil society in Serbia is confused, still digesting recent political developments. Before 2000 it was clear who was on whose side. Even if there is no such atmosphere of outright threat, the current mood is not favourable. NGOs and other critical voices against the official 'Kosovo is Serbia' policy are marked 'traitors'. As Dušan Bogdanović points out, analysing the recent media coverage "it is expected that the offensive against these 'enemies' will become one of the key elements of the public discourse in the coming months"⁴. In addition, NGOs today continue to suffer from a highly negative public image. Transparency issues aside, the annual NGO Sustainability Index published by the USAID states that civil society's public image in Serbia is "shaped primarily by a small number of NGOs known for their outspoken positions on human rights, war crimes, and other related issues"⁵. In private talks, NGO leaders mention similarities to the pre-2000 period. They are afraid that in the existing social and political climate, especially with an unreformed security structure, state power can be misused to monitor and harass them. But in this period of 'democracy', these fears only serve to confuse and obscure the sector's outlook.

Serbian civil society is as *introverted* as it was in 2003. The same personalities dominate, meaning a loss of new energy and vision and a failure to attract and retain a younger cadre. It is true that "even as NGOs lose employees, they lack policies and capacity to [...] provide even basic training for replacements, resulting in a sector-wide inability to transfer knowledge"⁶. This is clearly an internal structural problem. Meanwhile, donor-driven programs continue to dominate, despite the growth in NGOs among the triangle of Novi Sad – Belgrade – Niš. Progress overall has been limited, for which the inward-looking structural problems of the NGOs themselves remain partly to blame.

Civil society continues to be defined by *division* over unity. The split between pragmatists and essentialists⁷ is recent but enduring, with the pragmatists moving more mainstream. Essentialists who propagate 'first Mladić to ICTY, then EU integration' are becoming isolated and increasingly close to the controversial Liberal Democratic party (LDP). But for the Pragmatists, mainstream in the pro-European camp does not mean mainstream in the public perception. These divisions only hinder the efforts of civil society further.

Unlike these worrying similarities, there are three major differences between the states of civil society in 2003 and in 2008. Firstly, while in 2003, the "NGO sector in Serbia needed more technical and financial help than a new socio-political agenda"⁸, today it seems to need both. NGOs fight not only to survive as organizations but also to stir positive changes in society. As a result, secondly, Serbian civil society misses a greater *Europeanization drive* so necessary for catharsis in Serbia. And thirdly, the expected departure of international donors is finally becoming a reality, which only underlines the need for cross-sector partnerships and development of corporate donorship.

A New Reality for Europe and Serbia

The EU is facing a new set of challenges in the Balkans. What to do with a country, crucial to regional stability and security, which potentially may not be interested in joining the Union? How to support the weakened pro-European camp and moderate anti-European moods in Serbian society at the same time? How to help civil society, which faces its own problems but can be a vital force aiding Serbia towards the EU?

⁴ Bogdanović, Dušan: *Belgrade Riots (Feb 21, 2008) – background, dimensions, implications*. Electronic version of the paper, which was written for YUKOM and pescanik.net on February 23, 2008, is to be found at: <http://www.pescanik.net/UserFiles/File/Belgrade%20Riots,%20February%2021,%202008.pdf>.

⁵ USAID (2007) *NGO Sustainability Index*, p. 195

⁶ USAID (2007) *NGO Sustainability Index*, p. 193

⁷ This trend was discussed in the Pontis Foundation's Serbian Civil Brief "Stalemate in Serbia: The Spiral of Radicalism or a Foundation of a New Serbia?" from May 7, 2007. The document can be found in electronic version at <http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/en/12602>.

⁸ Pontis Foundation Assessment Trip to Serbia Report, March 2003

With Romania and Bulgaria already in the club and Croatia, Macedonia and Montenegro on the road to membership, it is only logical that Serbia follow suit. But with a strongly polarized country coming to terms with Kosovan independence, the EU must be prepared to be more patient and pro-active, whilst rethinking its carrot and stick approach. There are great expectations regarding DS and Tadić, but it is never wise to place all bets on one horse. The EU must prepare a new policy to a Serbia without Kosovo, astutely and carefully.

In this sense, the new EC's Communication "Western Balkans: Enhancing the European perspective" announced on March 5, is positive. Not only is the EU's intention to push Serbia towards the signing of the SAA and its engagement in Europol a great first step, but the intention to be more human and within reach for Serbian citizens is of immense value. The Pontis Foundation's experience in the field⁹ revealed a lack of solid information about the EU, with Serbs viewing the integration process as something distant, almost unreal. A big step forward was taken with the facilitated visa regime, which is expected to be liberalized further. Together with generous scholarship opportunities for students and youth exchanges, these are moves in a right direction.

Alongside the media, NGOs should play the role of a 4th power, as a number of EC officials have said¹⁰. In a timely move according to the recent EC's Communication, a new facility under IPA framework to promote civil society development will be introduced. This is a major shift, compared to 2003 or even a year ago. The Pontis Foundation in May 2007¹¹ too, recommended the EC support civil society more. The current question for the EU should be how to develop this support for civil society further and where the support should go in these sensitive months ahead?

A Way Out?

The Pontis Foundation acknowledges European support for Serbian civil society, but calls for greater attention and better tailored assistance from Europe. Despite the minimal progress within civil society during the last 5 years, Brussels should realize the sector has more potential to move Serbia towards the EU than the country's deadlocked political elite.

To further explore this potential, principles supporting civil society should be renewed, beginning with a *long-term commitment*. The EU has to be actively engaged in the patient, strategic restoration of *civic infrastructure* to overcome social polarization and anti-European feeling. With *systematic support* over the next five years, there can be progress made by NGOs which would in turn create a more favourable political environment.

Breaking down the principles, the Pontis Foundation recommends the following:

1. *Make civil society a new channel between Europe and Serbia* not only in terms of culture, art or education, but also in terms of policy and people to people contacts. Non-state actors from Serbia should be included in policy dialogue with Brussels (e.g. meetings, round tables, study visits, etc.).
2. *Enable generation exchange*: Serbian civil society currently lacks experienced institutions (mainly think-tanks) that would foster and nurture public policy debate. More young people and experts should be engaged in civil society and its efforts to make public policy public.
3. *Foster local civic initiatives*: The EU should assist local civic initiatives to promote a healthy social and intellectual climate and re-establish space for a free and vibrant

⁹ Pontis Foundation Assessment Trip to Serbia Report, March 2008

¹⁰ Pontis Foundation Assessment Trip to Brussels Report, November 2007

¹¹ Serbian Civil Brief "Stalemate in Serbia: The Spiral of Radicalism or a Foundation of a New Serbia?" from May 7, 2007. The document can be found in electronic version at <http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/en/12602>.

discussion on small, practical issues. This is crucial for expanding civil society's public outreach and closing the gap between the NGO sector and society.

4. *Support organizational development*: The EU should rethink financial assistance from IPA. After 10 years of providing institutional grants, EU assistance to local NGOs should shift/move to the provision of semi-institutional support (e.g. training on financial and organizational management, cross-sectoral partnerships, fundraising or establishing NGO transparency watchdogs, etc.).
5. *Get visible in Serbia*: The EU should rethink its communication strategy in Serbia and how to promote a European future. A new way of communication with Serbian public should be invented, with Serbs themselves taking the lead.

This is a crucial time for Serbia, with its neighbours on their way to EU membership, whilst Serbia licks its wounds freshly inflicted by Kosovan independence. The choice between integration into Europe, or looking further towards Russia for support, is a question at the heart of many in both Belgrade and Brussels. The May elections will be decisive, as will NGO involvement. The *déjà vu* currently being experienced by civil society in Serbia should not be allowed to continue. In this, the EU has a prime opportunity to make a change.