
ROUND TABLE

"Analysis of the NGO Environment in Serbia - Transition Challenges"

Summary of Analyses

**Belgrade
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ProConcept



Fund for an Open Society, Serbia

CONTENTS

ABOUT ProConcept	2
INTRODUCTION	3
LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CIVIL SECTOR'S ACTIVITY IN SERBIA	5
DONORS AND NGO ENVIRONMENT IN SERBIA	6
PRESS COVERAGE OF THE NGO SECTOR	10
NGO SECTOR'S PERCEPTION OF POLITICAL AUTHORITIES AND POLITICAL AUTHORITIES' PERCEPTION OF NGO SECTOR	14

About ProConcept

ProConcept was founded in May 2004 by former Executive and Network Directors of the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy – CeSID, with the goal of employing their experience and expertise in improving the work of NGOs and building capacities of non-governmental and other non-profit organizations and their leaders, so they can play important roles in the public life of Serbia.

Beside Republic of Serbia, projects and activities of the ProConcept team also encompass regions of the Western Balkans and Eurasia.

Previous experience of the ProConcept team includes organizing and participating in a total of 19 local and two regional (Bulgaria and Albania) election monitoring missions, as well as establishing the Montenegrin Organisation for Domestic Election Monitoring – CEMI and developing its capacities. The members of our team have also participated, as observers, in monitoring missions in Bulgaria, Croatia, Mexico and Ukraine. One member of the ProConcept team was engaged as an *Election Expert* within the OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission for the 2005 Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria.

The experience of the ProConcept team also includes consulting work in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Macedonia, Romania, Hungary and Moldova.

The present list of clients of the Pro Concept team encompasses the Management System International, Inc., Fund for an Open Society Serbia, National Democratic Institute and Danish Refugee Council.

Apart from the immediate engagement in aiding non-profit organizations, ProConcept team develops and carries out projects aimed at creating conditions for the NGOs to efficiently play their roles. The projects ProConcept carried out or is currently involved in include: *Analysis of NGO Environment in Serbia – Transition Challenges, Analysis of NGOs' Abilities and Capacities in Developing Civil Society in Serbia and On-line Consultancy.*

Our Vision

Nonprofit organizations will be active, productive and respected partners in shaping public policies.

Our Mission

Increasing the effectiveness and professionalism of organizations, leaders and partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental sector in Serbia and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are facing one difficult question: **How to proceed?**

According to the FENS survey, 75% of NGOs in Serbia are financially supported by donors from abroad (63% of these organizations have not secured financial means for the year 2005). Only 24% of donors give institutional grants. Although 61% of the surveyed NGOs claim they have had some cooperation with business sector¹, in 63% of the cases it was small sporadic support; only 6% are being given a strategically oriented and continual support from the business sector.

The situation with NGO activism in Serbia is no better than the one regarding financial dependence on foreign donors. According to researches, activism in non-governmental organizations does not exist apart from political orientation and party activism².

In numerous areas³, legislative system designed for the profit-oriented economic sector covers civil society as well. Unfortunately, those in charge of changing the regulations, i.e. political parties in Serbia, as present or future holders of legal and executive powers, failed to establish their stance on the civil society. Even when there is an attitude, it is reduced to (criticizing) reactions to non-governmental organizations' activities.

Besides that, NGOs get marginal publicity in the media. Altogether, the context in shows and articles covering the NGO activity is rather negative than affirmative, especially if the organization in question deals with human rights, war crimes and the ICTY trials.

As to the citizens of Serbia, (to whom our NGO sector's activities are directed, roughly speaking), a positive attitude on NGOs can be found in only one fourth of total population. This is compatible with the results of a survey conducted by "Danas" daily in 2001, when only one fourth of Serbian population had some knowledge or idea about the civil society, while the rest had none whatsoever. One third of those interviewed with at least 12 years of school education claim to know what non governmental organizations are, while two thirds know very little or nothing at all about them.

Analyses conducted in this project summary represent our small contribution to finding the answer to the question. Brief summaries of the analyses created and

¹ We should stress that 'cooperation' implies any aspect of communication, and smaller donations.

² Almost every fourth member of a party is a member of one or more non-governmental organizations. On the other hand, only between 7% and 11% are not members of any party. (Activism research, CeSID, March 2001.)

³ According to the analysis by Tatjana Pavlović-Križanić, those are: employment, social security, retirement, taxation, tax exemptions, foreign trade and customs, turnover and business bookkeeping.

presented by Tatjana Pavlović-Križanić, Marko Čadež and Srećko Mihailović follow in further text.

The members of ProConcept owe special gratitude to the people from the Center for Democracy Fund, whose premises are made available for this meeting, for their friendly and cooperative relationship with our team.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CIVIL SECTOR'S ACTIVITY IN SERBIA

Analysis by Tatijana Pavlović-Križanić

Summary

In view of the aforementioned circumstances, we have several very important reasons to urge the Government of Serbia to revise the foundations of the existing legislation regulating civil society's activities:

- The need to promptly create conditions to free the NGO sector from dependence on foreign donations and to ensure sustainable existence of the so-called third sector in Serbia – bearing in mind its crucial role in further democratization of Serbian society;
- The necessity to institutionally arrange the relationship between the state i.e. public authorities and the third sector, to avoid voluntarism, discrimination and marginalization of NGOs in the decision-making process;
- Arranging legal framework for the NGO sector's access to budget on all levels – state, autonomous province or municipality
- Creating a basis for the introduction of dual legislation in other fields such as labor law, retirement plan, injury and disablement insurance, customs and tax regulations, so as to create better conditions for the non-profit sector to be exempt from taxes and procedures normally required from commercial subjects – and thus create an environment conducive to their sustained economic development.

DONORS AND NGO SECTOR IN SERBIA

Analysis by Marko Čadež

Summary

Foreign donors' influence on the evolution of the NGO sector in Serbia from early nineties to present day is undeniable. Looking at the fact that, according to the latest "NGO Sector in Serbia" survey of March 2005, as much as 74% of Serbia's NGOs are financed from the funds of foreign donor organizations, we can easily deduct how much influence they exerted on creation and development of the third sector.

The NGO sector is entering the third phase of donors' activity, which is bound to change things from their foundations. This phase is characterized by the reduction of donors' activity and announcement of their soon complete withdrawal from the region. If the third sector wishes to survive, it will have to start searching for new financial sources. Experiences of other countries show the solutions should be looked for in regional networking and cooperation with the business sector. The results from the FENS March 2005 research on NGOs, as regards securing the means for their work, are causing concern. Namely, as much as 63% of organizations analyzed in the survey have not secured means for 2005.

Donor strategies and NGOs

The questions that will determine future NGO activity in Serbia and their ability to answer specific societal problems are:

- How can NGOs take active part in the analysis of needs and in defining donor strategies?
- Can already defined strategies influence how NGOs will define their priorities – i.e. to what an extent do they allow the donors to direct their work?

The first question implies two things: that the donors be ready to "listen" to their local partners, and that the NGOs develop an organizational ability to commit to permanently educating donors on specific problems.

It is noticeable that larger donor organizations with complex organizational and decision-making structure do not display necessary flexibility when defining priorities and reaching decisions. They rather stick strictly to pre-determined strategic guidelines, in most cases designed outside Serbia, while smaller donors are easier to reach.

As for the second question, one can also notice that NGOs often shift their field of interest to match the donors' goals, in order to survive. NGOs are not the only ones to blame for this phenomenon, one must take into consideration the fact that donor organizations give almost no institutional support today to nongovernmental organizations, which are in turn forced to "hunt projects" in order to survive instead of doing their principal activity. According to March 2005 FENS research, only 24% donors give institutional grants.

When one looks at the results of the latest research on NGO environment in Serbia, as regards the issues that NGOs and donors see as priority, one can often spot large discrepancy between the official field of an NGO's activity, and the kind of projects they receive funds for. Thus fields such as law-making, public policy, protection of Roma and other ethnic minorities' rights inspire higher interest among donors than among NGOs. On the other hand, NGOs are more interested in projects in the field of culture, education, social affairs, humanitarian work and children's rights than the donors.

Ability to actively join the process of creation of donor strategies by educating donor organizations and advancing communication with them will be crucial for further development of the third sector in Serbia.

NGO's relations with donor organizations

Meetings with the representatives of donor organizations, and researches conducted for the purpose of this report, gave us a clear insight into the difference between how NGOs perceive their own sector, and how donors perceive the NGO sector, namely, as not being professional enough. While NGOs are asking for an easier access, a simple and clear procedure for project approval, and a more frequent communication, donors usually believe their requirements are precise, clear and simple.

While NGOs believe they do know how to write a project, 76% of donors (according to FENS: "NGO Sector in Serbia", 2005), stress that the biggest obstacle they encounter in communicating with NGOs is the applicants' lack of experience in writing projects.

As for the communication between donors and NGOs, the general impression is that it only exists when there is a need to raise funds. The donors believe the relationship should be expanded to some more frequent consulting. They are willing to be educated on specific problems, but to also educate NGOs on their (i.e. donors') missions and fields of activity.

Donors have recognized two key problems which, once resolved, will positively impact the development of the third sector and the donors' efficiency and ability to answer societal problems with their programs:

- the need for the NGO sector to be better trained in how to fulfill the application procedure requirements

- the need for the donors to be educated

Professionalism

In donors' view, NGO's unskilled response to procedural requirements comes down to the lack of experience in writing projects and in project management, from application to evaluation. It is important to stress that donors, too, bear a part of the responsibility.

Absence of institutional support from the donors makes it difficult for NGOs to build their capacities and human resources, and more professional management. Such donors' policy is especially harmful to small non-governmental organizations and those just starting their work.

In order to be able to manage projects, thoroughly monitor contemporary issues, and actively communicate with donor organizations, NGOs require a complex organizational structure. Its financing must then be secured from the funds granted for the project.

New Donors – The Role of the Business Sector

A cut in means granted by foreign donors and a slow withdrawal of international donor organizations from the region represent new challenges for the third sector. These challenges require new strategies and new partnerships.

The March 2005 research also included the issue of NGO sector's cooperation with the business sector. Although 61% of interviewed organizations claim they have had some cooperation with the business sector, we should clarify that they were referring to any form of communication, including small donations.

Of all NGOs that cooperated with businesses, in 73% of the cases it was about getting small sporadic assistance, while only 6% were getting strategically developed continuous assistance from the business sector.

NGOs pinpoint to the lack of tax relieves for companies wishing to cooperate with NGOs as the number one cause of their poor cooperation with the business sector. This is indeed one of the reasons standing in the way of a more active cooperation, and it requires NGO's coordinated action directed to competent state bodies, lobbying for introduction of such tax relieves. However, this is not the only reason.

In order to build partnership with business sector, NGOs also need to change the way they operate. Unlike classical donor organizations whose activities are predominantly aimed at achieving specific changes in society, business sector's main goal is to gain profit, and changing society comes as a secondary activity connected with the fact that modern-day companies can't do business isolated from the society as a whole.

We should add that our companies are still inexperienced in cooperating with the third sector. It is therefore important to introduce them to the significance of NGOs and their role in society, and to the benefits of mutual cooperation. In order to achieve that, NGOs need to initiate pro-active communication with the business sector, getting thoroughly acquainted with the values, goals and the image of the companies they intend to cooperate with, so as to be able to clearly define their proposals to them. NGOs should also try to explain the companies why they should have an interest in cooperating with NGOs, what is unique about NGOs and what concrete benefits they would get from such cooperation. Business sector has a language of its own and its specific rules, and members of the third sector must adopt them if they want to establish a fruitful cooperation.

PRESS COVERAGE OF NGOS (November 2004 – January 2005)

Analysis by Stjepan Gredelj

Summary

16 newspapers were monitored over a period of three months, November 2004, December 2004, and January 2005.

Looking at all the monitored newspapers and news magazines together, a total of 414 texts were written about non-governmental organizations, most frequently in December (37%), and least frequently in January (29%).

On average, 138 texts were published per month, i.e. 10 per one newspaper or news magazine. Looking at individual newspapers/news magazines, the greatest number of texts were published in *Danas* (1/5 of all texts), followed by *Balkan* (15%), and the poorest coverage of the NGO activity was to be found in *Ekspres* (0,2%) and *Evropa* (0,5%).

Chart #1 Number of texts per month and per newspaper/news magazine(Total)

		November 2004.	December 2004.	January 2005.	Σ	% of total
1	Balkan	20	22	20	62	15
2	Blic	13	10	4	27	7
3	Danas	19	38	27	84	20
4	Dnevnik	6	9	15	30	7
5	Ekspres	2	0	0	2	0,5
6	Evropa	1	0	0	1	0,2
7	Glas javnosti	13	16	10	39	9
8	Internacional	6	16	12	34	8
9	Kurir	12	4	5	21	5
10	NIN	2	4	2	8	2

11	Politika	27	12	5	44	11
12	Pregled	2	3	3	8	2
13	Reporter	2	1	0	3	1
14	Večernje novosti	13	14	13	40	10
15	Vreme	4	3	1	8	2
16	Ekonomist	0	3	0	3	1
	Total	142	155	117	414	100,7

Chart #2 Number of texts on NGOs per type of newspaper/news magazine

Type of newspaper/ news magazine		% within the type
Daily informative newspapers (40%)	Politika	26
	Danas	51
	Dnevnik	18
	Pregled	5
Light genre (evening dailies) (26%)	Blic	25
	Ekspres	2
	Glas javnosti	36
	Večernje novosti	37
Tabloids (28%)	Balkan	53
	Internacional	29
	Kurir	18

	Evropa	4
News magazines (Periodical publications) (6%)	NIN	35
	Reporter	13
	Vreme	35
	Ekonomist	13

Chart #3 Genre forms (rough division)

Information ⁴	85
Author's text ⁵	13
Communication ⁶	2

Chart #4 Sources of information

The newspaper/magazine itself	61
Quoted from other sources (news agencies, TV, other media...)	15
NGOs (press releases, statements, press conferences)	22
Feed-back (letters, debates)	2

Chart #5 Type of connotation in the text (all newspapers and magazines, in %)

Affirmative	Neutral	Negative
15	56	29

⁴ Various types of news and reports

⁵ Articles, comments, reportage

⁶ Readers' letters, debates

Chart #6 Type of engagement in the text (%)

Type of newspaper/magazine	Affirmative	Criticism ⁷
Daily informative newspapers	60	40
News magazines	38	62
Light genre - evening dailies	29	70
Tabloids	12	88

Conclusions

NGOs enjoy marginal publicity in the print media (10 texts a month on average, per daily or magazine). Their activities are most often covered in a short form (bulletins and short reports). They are often not even reported about - their press releases or statements of their representatives are published instead. In case an NGO should "merit" a larger form (i.e. an article or a comment), these would mostly be written in a negative context, with condescending texts. Such manner of "providing information" was most often used in the *NIV* magazine, and some tabloids (which was somewhat expected).

The overall context of the NGO coverage in the press is rather negative than affirmative, especially when it comes to organizations dealing with war crimes and ICTY trials. The "favorite" subjects of animosity-filled texts are the Humanitarian Law Fund, Helsinki Committee Serbia and Legal Advisor's Committee for Human Rights, i.e. their chairpersons – Ms Nataša Kandić, Ms Sonja Biserko and Ms Biljana Kovačević – Vučo.

⁷ See charts #16 and #17 in the Attachement for distribution of texts displaying exclusively „negative“ emotions

THE NGO SECTOR'S PERCEPTION OF POLITICAL AUTHORITIES AND POLITICAL AUTHORITIES' PERCEPTION OF THE NGO SECTOR

Analysis by Srećko Mihajlović

Summary

The part of the project I worked on included working both in the empirical field and in theory. Empirical data, as was foreseen, were used for the purpose of testing theoretical theses, and simultaneously to establish benchmarks for future practical policies in the field.

Three groups of data sources had to provide us with enough material to do the analysis of the situation in reality, and we expected the representatives of political and civil society to give us guidelines on what they expect the evolution of this field will be in the future:

- 1) written documents - party programs, programmatic declarations, etc;
- 2) meetings with political party officials;
- 3) meetings with civil society representatives (this source was later clearly defined in a separate special gathering on this issue);
- 4) empirical research of the civil society;
- 5) theoretical essays on the issue.

However, we encountered a series of difficulties regarding point 2). The first impressions we got in the last months of the past year were later confirmed at the beginning of this year. We learned one could not expect much from the representatives of the political society. Our requests for meetings were turned down or accepted reluctantly. The meetings we held showed that relevant political parties in Serbia in fact failed to build an attitude the civil society. The existing attitude is almost without exception reduced to the reaction of rejection (with criticism) to certain activities organized by NGOs.

This impression was later confirmed when we took a closer look at the resource 1), i.e. the documents containing party programs. It turned out that, with the exception of the Social Democratic Party, no political party addressed the issue of civil society, or even mentioned non-governmental organizations.

Small political parties showed willingness to talk, but despite being pretty open, their representatives did not have any knowledge of issues related to civil society. Their "openness" to cooperate with the NGO sector was rather aimed at getting support from the NGOs during elections than the result of a true willingness to establish a long-lasting relationship.

To put it simply, big parties' position on the NGOs is based on a "Let's not make enemies of them if there is no need to" attitude, and little parties' attitude is "It would be good if they brought us some votes".

Two types of NGO activity always provoke negative response among all parties in general: opening the question of nationalistic behavior in the past and present (including nationalism during Milosevic's reign), and showing support for some fractions in political parties, regardless of whether the fraction in question is still part of the party, or is already independent.

Thus, for example, NGOs' "support" to "Ceda's people", or any other NGO activity related to "Ceda", provokes negative reactions even among those parties that are Democratic Party's (DS) strong adversaries.

Such perception of the civil society in the strict sense is contrasted by a much greater readiness to discuss topics concerning civil society in a broader sense, such as the media, churches and trade unions. However, we did not have discussions of that kind on this occasion.

The situation made us focus more on data sources such as empirical research, theoretical essays and other works on civil society, and on materials published by non-governmental organizations, that document their own activities.

The relationship between the civil sector and politics, as we had a chance to see from many aspects, is an open issue in social science, in theory and in practice. Data displayed in Table 1 reveal that the complexity of this relationship is also reflected in public opinion.

The public opinion is divided over whether members of civil society should keep away from politics, or take part in it in some way. A recent research (March 2005) surveyed public opinion on six segments of civil society.

The results show that about 1/2 of the interviewed citizens believe that trade unions, employers' associations and associations of professionals should be involved in politics, while one third have completely opposite opinion, while the remaining 15%-23% say they do not know the answer to the question.

On the other hand, 2/3 of those interviewed believe the church shouldn't have any connection with politics (29% think the opposite, and the rest have no answer).

1/2 of the participants believe NGOs and the media shouldn't be involved in politics: 1/3 think NGOs should be involved (1/5 have no opinion), 2/5 (40%) think the media should be involved, and 13% say they do not know.

Table 1: Public opinion on civil society segments' relationship to politics (in %)

	Should have no connection with politics	Should have an influence on important societal decisions	Should participate in politics as partners to political parties	I don't know	Total
Church	58	25	4	13	100
NGOs	48	25	8	19	100
Media	47	34	6	13	100
Employers' associations	34	38	9	19	100
Trade unions	33	41	11	15	100
Professional associations	33	36	8	23	100

Source: CESID, JMS 2/05; March, 2005.

Table 2: Purpose of the "Partnership for Democratic Changes" (in %)
("Partnership for Democratic Changes" was founded out of the need for all the opposition parties, trade unions, NGOs and expert groups that bring changes to work together – What is your opinion on it?)

Politics is political parties' business – and all others should not interfere	2
After the change of the regime the need to work together no longer exists – everyone should do their own job	3
Working together in partnership is still needed, since it's a long and difficult road	23
I don't know, I'm not informed, no answer	72
TOTAL	100

Source: Poll conducted for "Danas" daily; 1200 participants, quota number of interviewees with high school and with college degree; March 2001

Table 3: Opinion on the role of the NGOs gathered around the “Partnership for Democratic Changes”

<i>The NGOs should:</i>	I do not agree	Undecided	I agree	I don't know, no answer	Total
Support and follow new democratic authorities	10	9	9	72	100
Be the opposition to the new authorities and criticize their shortcomings	4	6	18	72	100
Come to an agreement on the course and costs of changes through cooperation	2	6	20	72	100
Organize debate on all key issues	1	3	24	72	100
Point at problems and offer solutions	1	4	23	72	100
Educate people for democracy and public activity	1	4	23	72	100
Enable control over the authorities, by cooperating with each other	1	4	23	72	100

Source: Poll conducted for “Danas” daily; 1200 participants, quota number of interviewees with high school and with college degree; March 2001

To sum up, the citizens’ assessment of the need for the civil society to get involved in politics varies significantly. Typical example is the public opinion on NGOs – while half are against their political engagement, one third is in favor of it, and one fifth has “no idea”. But when we focus our attention on those citizens who state they are in some form active in NGOs - we named them “activists”- then the picture changes.

Two thirds of that group advocate the need for the NGOs to get involved in politics, and only one third rejects it. (No activist said “I do not know”) Exactly one half of the total number of activists believe NGOs should influence decisions important for society, and about 16% believe NGOs should be engaged in politics as political parties’ partners.

Clearly, **the NGOs’ indirect political involvement, using influence, is the main preference. There is much less preference for the NGOs to be directly involved in politics** (as partners to political parties).

On the other hand, 3/5 of the public is opposing the church’s involvement in politics, 1/4 is in favor of it and 13% claim they could not decide in this case. However, 1/2 of those interviewed who declare themselves as actively religious, we called them “religious activists”, support the church’s involvement in politics, and the other half is against it. Among those in favor of the church’s

engagement in politics, 1/3 would like it to be by way of influence, 8% by direct involvement and 9% are undecided⁸.

The most detailed research on the relationship between the NGO sector and politics was conducted in March 2001. It focused on the non-governmental organizations gathered around the "Partnership for Democratic Changes". It showed that the **citizens of Serbia** (those who have completed at least 3 years of high school education, to be precise) **support cooperation and partnership between nongovernmental organizations and political parties** (see Table 2).

Another part of the poll was related to specific type of relation (see Table 3). It was precisely there that I not only found the cross-section of the public opinion on our main topic, but the core of the problem, too.

Two aspects of the relationship between the NGO sector (and the entire civil society) and the political environment were covered in the questionnaire: relationship to the authorities (i.e. the state, party state and state parties), and relationship to the public (i.e. their role in shaping the public and the way it functions)

1. Authorities

- 1.1. Support and loyalty to the (new) authorities
- 1.2. Criticizing shortcomings of the (new) authorities and acting as opposition
- 1.3. Monitoring and controlling the authorities

2. Public

- 2.1. Public debate on important social issues
- 2.2. Reaching an agreement on the course and costs of changes (problems and solutions)
- 2.3. Education for democracy

As regards the three aspects of the relationship the NGOs' can adopt towards politics, citizens tend to support the criticizing role more (see frame above) (18%) and the role to monitor and control government's activities (23%). Only 9% support NGO's loyalty to the authorities.

Between 1/5 and 1/4 of interviewees support the three aspects of the NGO sector's relation to the public – organizing public debate on important social issues, working on an agreement on the course and costs of the changes

⁸ The overall conclusion is that civil society activists, regardless of the type of their activity, support the need for the civil sector to engage in politics, primarily using influence, and then being directly involved.

(pointing to problems and offering solutions), and educating for democracy. Considering that 3/4 (72%) did not answer these questions, actually a high percentage of those who have an opinion on the issue do support these roles in relation to the public.

I believe the results of the 2001 survey represent the essence of the kind of attitude our citizens want the NGOs (and the civil society as a whole) to adopt towards the authorities, the state, and political environment in general.