

# **T**he Role of the Council of Europe in the democratization of the civil society in Bulgaria

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## **Abstract**

The paper explores the external support and democratic assistance of the Council of Europe towards the process of democratization and consolidation of democracy in the Republic of Bulgaria (mostly to the civil society and NGO sector) from the beginning of the democratic reforms to the accession to European Union (1989-2007). The paper analyzes the techniques and the steps undertaken, as well as the role of the civil society in the process of democratization; it also presents the different instruments and mechanisms for civil society consolidation and defines seven fields of impact of the Council of Europe on the civil society. The Council of Europe provided a significant and remarkable assistance to the civil society organizations; its role and impact is examined in the three specific periods of the Bulgarian democratization process.

**Key Words:** civil society, external support, Council of Europe, Bulgaria, democratization.

## **Introduction**

This paper will assess the impact and the level to which the Council of Europe has influenced and contributed to the democratization process in Bulgaria (especially for the civil society) by means of different tools. The main research question refers to

what level and extent the Council of Europe policies influenced and marked the democratic transformation in Bulgaria in the period between November 10th 1989 (fall of communist regime in a party coup) and 2007 (full accession to EU) and to what tools were used in the civil society sector.

The Council of Europe holds a significant importance in the establishment, support and development of the democratization process in the Eastern block of Europe. The Council of Europe places the supremacy of the law, pluralistic democracy and the human rights at the base of its philosophy.

One of the comparatively new characteristics of the democratization is the influence of the international and external factors on its development in Eastern and Central Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The wave of democratization and the processes clearly show that in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania after 1989, the democratization is not only the inner result of the national states, but is deeply affected by external influence, aiming at the “transformation of the inner political system” (Pridham, 1991; Whitehead, 1996). Authors like Diamond (1993: 43) argue that there is a new phenomenon known as “globalization of democratization” considering the democratization wave in Eastern and Central Europe in the 90s.

In the literature, the influence of the international organizations on the process of democratization is well represented. Some authors, such as Whitehead and Schmitter (1996), Levitsky (2005), Wu (2005), analyze the influence of the international organizations on the democratization, the mechanisms and techniques of the influence, the inner and the external factors in the different transition phases, the dynamics of the democratization and the changes of the strategies. Plenty of research is available on the influence of the different international factors, such as EU, UN, OSCE, USAID, IMF, NATO, WB, international NGOs. Basic authors argue on the role of international external factors for democratic development in Eastern and Central Europe (Grabbe, 1999; Senarchens, 2001; Woods and Narlikar, 2001; Piccone, 2002; Azpuru,

Finkel, Linan, Selingson, 2008), but the role of the Council of Europe in not enlightened clearly.

The existing literature on the Council of Europe examines the inner relations and mutual work of the member states, the functioning of the institutions, the process of checks and balances through the accession process and monitoring dialogue, but not on the international support for democratization. The research of Konstantinov (1997); Filipova and Giezyńska (2007) and Romer and Klebes (2007) analyzes the accession requirements and their implementations, mostly of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) as a milestone for the democratic development and constitutional design in the countries in transition on their road to full accession to the Council of Europe and latter to the European Union.

### **The principles and priorities of the Council of Europe in its relations and assistance to the civil society**

The process of democratization of Bulgaria is marked by three main phases and periods (Kaleynska, 2011: 94).

The first phase covers the process of political liberalization and democratization in Bulgaria, started on November 10th, 1989 and ended with the accession of Bulgaria to the Council of Europe on May 7th, 1992. It is marked by the adoption of a new Constitution, holding democratic elections, building new political institutions, support towards the newly born civil society and democratization of the traditional political parties.

The second period covers the accession of the country to the Council of Europe till its accession as member of the European Union, more specifically the period between May 1992 and December 2006. On May 7th, 1992 Bulgaria became a full member of the Council of Europe. The accession became a long-term guarantee for the processes of widening, deepening and sustaining the process of democratization in the country. During the period, the Council of Europe has been monitoring the process of implementation of the democratic values and strengthening of democracy.

The third period is from the moment of becoming a member-state of the European Union till now – more specifically, since January 2007 till now. The main activities of the Council of Europe are carried out monitoring the process of implementation of the European policies, examining the human rights status, the minority rights, and the multiculturalism in Bulgaria.

The impact of the Council of Europe on the civil society follows the priorities of the organization for the affirmation and stabilization of the political system. The author argues that there are seven main areas of impact and intervention of the Council of Europe on the civil society which mark the specifics of the influence of the international organization on Bulgaria and its civil society.

Firstly, the NGOs are a mechanism and experimental field for a change in the overall public policy. They have been seen as a stable and reliable partner of the government in the process of creating a new democratic legal framework, approbation of new laws have been performed, implementation of best international practices and transfer of know-how. The process has been both sided. On one hand, trained to indicative expertise and capacity assistance, the NGOs were actively involved in the process of policy making at local, regional and national level. On the other hand, the NGOs tested laws, a practical “laboratory” for the law drafting was approved. Good examples are the approbation of the draft Law on Child Protection by implementation of the pilot project "Children at Risk"; draft legislative texts on corruption, introduction of the Ombudsman office, state delegated social services, protection of cultural monuments, minorities, freedom of media and so on. In practice, a significant part of the adopted Bulgarian legislation was tested in a real environment through micro and sub-projects funded by the Council of Europe by the program "Confidence building Measures". Since 2002 has been introduced the practice of annual preparation and disclosure of "shadow reports" done by the NGOs in parallel and in response to the official reports of the government to the Council of Europe, which acts as important sources for the determination of the highlights of the monitoring and post-monitoring dialogue. Thus

each year, a coalition of NGOs with "Interethnic Initiative for Human Rights", Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, SEGA, prepares a "shadow report" for the improvement and protection of the human rights in Bulgaria.

Secondly, the expectations which are directly related to the promotion and protection of the human rights were delegated to the NGOs. In the overall process of protection of human rights and the drafting of the related documents for Bulgaria, the NGO expertise of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, "Bulgarian Lawyers for Human Rights" and the Association for European Integration and Human Rights has been taken. Special policy for building a capacity for working in multicultural environment was the support to over 30 civic organizations of minorities, the most active and recognized, such as Association "Diverse and Equal", "Nevo Drom", Center for Public Policy and Advocacy, "Turkish Cultural Center 21st century", civil association "Evet" and others.

Thirdly, the Council of Europe defines its impact on building the civil society through a special emphasis on civic education. Awareness of the wide range of human rights, understanding the equality, personal responsibility and obligations in the course of the democratic process enable the citizen to be an active participant in the decision-making process at all levels.

Good case study is Education for Democracy Center (<http://www.centerbg.org/index.php?lang=english>).

Specific expression and specifics of democratic support of the Council of Europe for the development of education and the construction of the democratic political system has been the start-up of the Schools of Politics. Founded in 2001 as an NGO, the Bulgarian School of Politics ([www.schoolofpolitics.org](http://www.schoolofpolitics.org)) supports the creation of civic and political leaders with an active stand in the national, European and global political process led by the modern democratic values of pluralism, tolerance and informed dialogue. Bulgarian School of Politics seeks to promote the process of democratization in Bulgaria and the countries of the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region. A special regional program for South-Eastern Europe has

been designed to support young democracies and to extend the good example set in Bulgaria, to strengthen the dialogue of tolerance and understanding on regional level.

Each year, over 800 young politicians and NGO leaders from the 14 schools across Europe meet in Strasbourg for the Summer University for Democracy - a “political laboratory” for a common European policy and the future of united Europe.

Fourthly, the Council of Europe has impact on the socio-economic rights and their protection through NGOs in Bulgaria, creating public-private partnership as a social capital of the democratic process. An illustrative example is the founded 28 Regional Development Agencies, united in Association of Regional Development Agencies, which have a significant impact on the overall socio-economic climate and development.

The fifth direction of impact the Bulgarian civil sector was the development of the local democracy and the acceleration and support of the process of decentralization in Bulgaria. The National Association of Municipalities (NAMB) ([www.projects-namrb.org/index.php/bg](http://www.projects-namrb.org/index.php/bg)), established in 1996, is a sound example of completed network of citizen participation in decision-making at national level, which gave a rebirth of local democracy.

An innovative and unique actor in Bulgaria, which has been the directly supported by the organization, is the Foundation for Local Government Reform (FLGR) ([www.flgr.bg/bg](http://www.flgr.bg/bg)). Established in 1995, FLGR offers information, consultation and support, focused on the specific needs of the municipalities. Its experience was specially studied by the Council of Europe and multiplied in Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Georgia, Kosovo and Romania.

On a regional scale, the Council of Europe had a strong impact on the establishment and strengthening of regional democracy by encouraging and supporting foundation of regional associations of municipalities as mediators of local and regional democracy and expanding active participation of citizens in local self-governance.

The sixth field was the youth of Bulgaria, as a guarantee of the irreversibility of the democratic transition and the creation of active young generation with democratic culture. In 2004, after the adoption of the Charter for the participation of young people in the life of municipalities and regions, the youth self-government and youth participation in school and community life got a new push.

The access to information on native language was the seventh line of work on defining the impact of the Council of Europe in Bulgaria. The organization conducted its information policy in Bulgaria in a unique way. It has created its own information network and has a direct influence on the process of democratization in Bulgaria through its Information and Documentation centers. In Bulgaria was introduced a unique approach. Both centers were hosted by NGOs - in Sofia Centre for the Study of Democracy ([www.csd.bg/index.php?id=165](http://www.csd.bg/index.php?id=165)), in Veliko Turnovo - European Information Centre ([www.europeinfocentre.bg/?lang=bg](http://www.europeinfocentre.bg/?lang=bg)). That was a clear sign of the importance that the Council of Europe pays to the civil sector. At the same time, through the information centers, the Council of Europe easily spread its policies. After the year 2000, the Council of Europe created a network of information points and during 2000-2006 in Bulgaria eight such points were recognized officially. The practice of Bulgaria, assessed as very successful and effective for the reach of communities, lead to the opening of information points in Russia, Romania, Slovakia and Poland.

## **Conclusions**

An analysis of the democratization and consolidation of democracy in Bulgaria is of major importance for the future of country democracy as well as for the balance between the inner and external factors.

The Council of Europe contributed heavily to the development of the non-profit sector in the country by implementing different approaches to the other CEC in transition. The assistance of the Council of Europe in Bulgaria to the development of civil society led to defining several successful practices that are helping to speed

up the democratization process, and that could easily be adapted to different post authoritarian societies.

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