

Conference report

The conference “Fostering cooperation among NGOs publishing NGO periodicals” took place on 31 March, 2007 in Budapest. The conference was organised by the Hungarian quarterly *Civil Szemle* (*Civil review*) and financed by the Visegrad Fund. Representatives of NGOs and academic institutions from the Visegrad countries, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia but also from the UK and the Netherlands took part in this conference.

During the first two sessions speakers addressed the status of NGO studies and NGO periodicals in the above-mentioned countries. The presentations regarding Hungary and Poland revealed that only the NGO periodicals in these countries (*Civil szemle* and *Trzeci sektor* respectively) have come out regularly for the last few years. However, just like the existing in the past and currently issued NGO periodicals in Slovakia, their further publishing is contingent upon the continuation of the projects they have been part of. The Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia have only had inter-sectoral NGO periodicals, which lack the pro-academic stance characterising *Civil szamle*, *Trzeci sektor* and the Polish monthly newspaper *www.ngo.pl*. On-line inter-sectoral newsletters do exist in all CEE countries represented at the conference. However, the scope of these newsletters is often limited and usually serves the needs of NGOs sharing the same field of activity. Nonetheless, there exist such on-line publications like the weekly bulletins of the Foundation for Local Government Reform in Bulgaria and the Polish such published by Klon/Jawor, which *de facto* serve the whole NGO community and the public at large.

The overview of existing indigenous NGO studies in the Visegrad countries and Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia revealed that the status of such researches is quite unevenly developed in this part of Europe. NGO studies are conducted in all of these countries, albeit only Poland and Hungary can boast regular representative surveys of the Third sector. Eduard Marcek (Slovakia, PANET), Rozalia Csaki (Romania, Civitas) and Galia Chimiak (Poland, Bulgaria, IFiS PAN) presented evidence that in Slovakia and the two new EU member states there have been no systematic NGO studies, no think-tanks specialised in conducting such studies as well as no regular journals to register the state of Third sector research. Jan Kroupa (Czech Rep., NETT) argued a “research game” is going on in the Czech Republic, meaning there seems to be an unanimous agreement that NGO studies are needed, yet little is done to regularly conduct empirical research and even less—to come up with theoretical such. Gojko Bezovan (Croatia, University of Zagreb) and Galia

Chimiak underlined the crucial part played by foreign funders in supporting not only the development of the NGO sectors in Croatia and Bulgaria, but also in fostering debates and research in these countries. Presentations during the conference also highlighted the fact that the effort at self-knowledge most often comes from the NGO sector itself. Academic communities appear to lag behind in the attempt to systematically research the development of institutionalised civic initiatives.

A common phenomenon in all countries represented at the conference “Fostering cooperation among NGOs publishing NGO periodicals” is the dual function fulfilled by many of the people conducting NGO studies. Namely, often academics researching the Third sector are at the same time active members of non-governmental organisations. Another trend observable in East-Central Europe appears to be the change of status of NGOs conducting NGO studies. Such think-tanks tend to become affiliated to universities or other academic institutions. This tendency is especially visible in the Czech Republic. To sum up, the presentations at this conference revealed that despite the difficulties encountered by the communities researching the NGO sector, there exist a group of highly motivated experts in each of these countries. These are people committed to study institutionalised civic initiatives and share their knowledge with students in the budding university courses related to non-profit organisations.

The third session of the conference “Fostering cooperation among NGOs publishing NGO periodicals” commenced with a presentation by Eva Kuti (Hungary, Budapest College of Management), a well-known NGO researcher with significant experience in international studies on NGOs. She made an overview of existing international researches on the Third sector including countries from East-Central Europe. Eva Kuti admitted that international networks of scholars are actually closed for researchers from the former communist bloc in Europe. With commendable frankness she pointed out that participation in international networks of scholars from CEE countries researching the NGO sector is very much accidental and, as it happens, not always merit-based. Eva Kuti expressed her concern that the current community of scholars from East-Central Europe taking part in international researches of the Third sector is ageing. She also pinpointed several objective reasons that in her opinion preclude younger researchers to get actively involved in international academic networks in general. Apparently the command of foreign languages and English especially does not suffice to help young researchers become actively engaged in international academic organisations or networks. Besides, scholars from the new 12 member states of the European Union seem to lack the know-how needed to independently design an international research project to tap EU funds for academic research.

Eva Kuti concluded that since researchers from East-Central Europe can't compete with their colleagues from the US and the more developed European countries and they also experience difficulties to effectively cooperate with the latter, CEE countries' scholars may need to join together their efforts and launch a common initiative. The conference “Fostering cooperation among NGOs publishing NGO periodicals”

could be a first step in this direction. The participants voiced their wish to take part in the network begotten at this conference and expressed their genuine intention to try to develop this network into full-fledged academic institution serving the needs of both the academic and NGOs' communities in the region.

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