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In Search of Perspectives on Development of the Third Sector in CEE Countries

(Summary of key discussion points)

Until now there has not been developed a single body of theory that would explain the position of the third sector in the countries undergoing a process of transition from authoritarian to democratic system. In such „theoretical vacuum” it seems useful to adopt two perspectives originally referring to political participation in the period of transition in CEE countries and a concept called redirection of demand and responsibility for social welfare. It seems that these approaches might shed some light on the third sector in CEE countries, provide insights and hopefully raise issues for further research.

1. Theory of political heritage

The main assumption of the theory of political systems’ heritage underlines the impact of the former system on current political/social behaviour. This concept implies that for quite some time in a newly emerging democratic systems the elements of the former socio-political order will still be playing a role. Among the inherited factors are cultural heritage (e.g.: the lack of belief in one’s impact on the sphere of politics/public life) and institutional heritage (e.g. underdevelopment of third sector organizations during the state socialism period). This institutional heritage is reflected in a composition of nonprofit paid employment in the former socialist countries, where culture and professional organizations dominate the third sector; vis a vis the third sector in developed countries, the nonprofit sector in the Central European Region constitutes a small force in terms of paid employment and public sector payments constitute a much smaller portion than in developed countries, while fees and other professional incomes account for almost 50% of all nonprofit revenue.

Questions: what are the strategies to overcome the communist heritage in the countries in question? What types of third sector institutions have developed over the last decade? What are their functions? How successful are they?

2. A concept of transition period

This concept implies that the dynamic of the political/public activity heavily depends on the cultural, institutional and structural processes that are taking place in the period of transition from totalitarian to democratic system. Among the key factors that determine the political and social behaviour are economic factors such as a discrepancy in living conditions and structural changes that follow the economic reforms, which partly result in deconstruction of the former social strata. Another argument is that the key element for the political participation during a period of transformation is a political /social disillusionment with political elites and institutions.

Questions: What are the consequences of the structural changes in the sphere of social participation in the CEE countries – radicalization of social behaviour or/and increasing of „citizens’ depression” and withdrawal from public participation? What impact does it have on third sector organizations?

3. A concept of re-direction of demand and responsibility of the welfare systems in CEE countries and the third sector response

Questions: what are the emerging models of relations between non-profit organizations and public sector in former Communist countries? How do they work?