

TRUST FOR CIVIL SOCIETY FOR CEE
Bulgarian Sociological Association

Everyday Citizenship:

Practices and Strategies for Stimulating Civil Society in Bulgaria Today

March 2012 – April 2013

“There can be no citizenship other than active, [...] citizenship that is not merely a status of a person, but a practice, or set of practices, that connect the poles of one’s *attitude to oneself* and *attitude to others...*”

Étienne Balibar

Place of the project in relation to state-of-the-art in the field

Having been deprived for 45 years of possibilities for collective action of freely associated people, and after 20 years of efforts for building the civic sphere in Bulgaria, society today continues to be ridden with contrasting attitudes: the activities of powerful NGOs vs. the wait-and-see attitude of the majority of Bulgarian citizens; commitment vs. reserve with regard to common issues; perpetual leaders and unchanging but passive supporters. Despite the general climate of feeble trust between people and low trust in social institutions, lately certain forms of civic activeness can be observed, which arise and develop outside the familiar structures and channels of political power, non-governmental movements, and organized mobilization of people. This *ordinary, everyday citizenship*, where citizens organize themselves outside institutionalized politics, is one of the main motors of contemporary civil society and an antidote to chronic mistrust in the state and politics. The fields in which active citizenship is exercised are the areas of everyday life, of the worlds of experience (*Lebenswelt*), of those solidarities in which commitment to others is linked with collective meanings and collective construction of the world in which we live, rather than with the functioning of political power.

In previous research and policy-oriented activities, the problems of civic activeness have been approached mostly with emphasis on the non-governmental sector, the critical public, the dichotomy ‘civil society vs. state’, the transformation of networks into power relationships, and on the degree of civic engagement of various social groups. In all these approaches, ordinary citizens are mostly seen as subjected to impacts and policies, rather than as agents or initiators of action. This is not coincidental, because it is only in recent years that

a new social phenomenon has become apparent: real alternative practices are emerging whereby people jointly and voluntarily effectuate, discuss, and assess their coexistence, their living together, without the intermediation of social authorities, institutionalized authorities, or professional institutions. For the first time we see citizens who are not consumers of services, not beneficiaries of programs, but real actors who daily overcome institutionalized obstacles and legislative confusion, social autism and sluggish bureaucracy, and build their own lives through relations that they themselves have established with other people.

With the project we are describing here we propose to ascertain and analyze the **importance of ordinary citizenship for making civil society more dynamic and for humanizing social relationships in Bulgaria.**

Problems identification

In relation to these new forms of joint civic action, the question arises as to their place and role in building not simply a vigorous civil society but a new kind of social relationships based on recognition, personal commitment, goodwill, attachment to shared values, tastes, interests. Relevant to this, several groups of questions may be addressed:

- How, when, and in what form is it possible to mobilize civic energy without the mediation of professional politicians or the media? What are the factors of the social vitality and effectiveness of everyday citizenship? What is the social morphology of everyday civic activeness (by regions, settlements, sectors and forms of activity, types of social problems, forms of activity, etc.)? Is taking civic initiatives away from its classical agents a risk or a fortunate opportunity for civil society? Do the new forms of citizenship overcome pre-political inequalities (economic and social) or can they be a source of new divisions based on ethnic and religious solidarity?
- What are the relationships of these new civic practices with the institutions of the political and administrative system and the traditional, institutionalized forms of activity of civil society (NGOs, trade unions)? Are the new practices recognized by the classical agents of political action, and if so, what part of their activities is recognized; if not, why not? Is the transformation of the energy of ordinary citizens into a resource for institutionalized actors a good opportunity for developing a new civic sociality, or does it hold risks for the latter?
- Why do people increasingly resort to self-organized collective action and self-initiated association, thereby turning their backs on classical forms of institutionalized political

action (parties, syndicates, social movements, etc.)? What do these new forms of social solidarity, constructed outside the forms of organized activism, express: are they a response to accumulated disregard and lack of recognition on the part of society, or a need to be yourself, to look for people of the same mind with whom to share needs and interests? Might the wide growth of informal civic initiatives prove a threat to the authority of classical institutions and subjects of political action, and take the place of the familiar forms of civic activeness and civic participation, such as political movements and trade unions?

- What are the modalities of public activity of ordinary citizens and under what designations, by what means of expression, do these practices seek legitimization in public space? How do these trends restructure relationships and communication between ordinary citizens and well-established actors of the civic sector and public power institutions?

Goals

The project has two main goals:

a) a research goal: to identify the new forms of civic engagement lying outside and apart from institutionalized public power channels and to show their potential for:

- overcoming the limitations and weaknesses of the civic sector in recent Bulgarian history (after 1989);
- stimulating the political sphere as a space for action and self-expression of free people;
- overcoming social distrust and disregard for groups, ideas, and causes in contemporary Bulgarian society.
- expanding social dialogue through the participation of all as equal and unique members of society, regardless of their personal economic and social status;
- enhancing the social self-confidence and conviction of ordinary citizens in the social power of joint action.

b) an applied social goal: to create conditions for the expression and expansion of this potential by:

- **publicizing the practices of informal civic mobilization** identified in various spheres of public life. These practices, generated by the need for social recognition of standpoints and causes, are in need not of advertisement but **of expression of the social message they carry** – the quality of our life depends on our joint social

creativity, which is a continuous movement between the given conditions and what we want to do and/or can do. It is precisely the social lessons learned from the initiatives of ordinary citizens for action in everyday life that are *fundamental to the new perspectives of citizenship, which involve concern for others, mutual aid attitudes, willingness to share experience, knowledge, ideas, preferences.*

- **attracting the attention of government and judiciary authorities to various obstacles and shortcomings** (organizational, institutional, judicial) that “ordinary” civic mobilization are making visible. Such awareness could bring about new forms of social interaction where citizens and official policy assist one another for the common good, but might also use one another as tools in the pursuit of group goals and interests.
- **throwing a bridge between established actors in the civic sector and participants in spontaneous civic mobilizations**, thereby overcoming low trust between people and in institutions, the feeble or missing capacity for self-organization of individuals, ever waiting for outside, foreign assistance or the support of powerful individuals. *Civic education is a primary task for the formation of attitudes of active civic presence and behavior.*

These two goals are interconnected, and this reflects our standpoint that **sociological knowledge is a resource only when implemented in action**. Hence, the project aims at a double result: on one hand, building well informed and enlightened citizens and institutions, whose effective interaction depends on knowledge of one another and understanding of their own practices; and to enhance the professional and public responsibility of sociologists themselves for the production of scientifically valid, socially significant and practically useful knowledge. Thus, when the professional competency of social researchers meets the social experience of surveyed persons, a more realistic possibility appears for civil society in Bulgaria to grow as respectful of, and satisfying for, all participants.

Results

The results that may be expected to follow from the project are:

- The production of a geographic, social, and typological map of the forms of ordinary citizenship in Bulgaria as an element of the self-cognition of contemporary Bulgarian society, essential for its development as a society;

- Bringing about the emergence of social actors of different types and at different levels (ordinary citizens, national and local leaders of political parties, trade union organizations, and social movements, agents of power, journalists) who are well-informed of the potential of the new forms of citizenship as a generator of a new social environment, in which the horizontal relationships of direct engaged contact and the vertical relationships with institutions can be mutually complementary for pursuing certain social causes.
- A change of perspective on, and public discourse about, civil society as a daily growing world of coexistence, the quality of which is enhanced through respect, recognition, commitment, engagement towards other people, regardless of the various institutional and social roles that each person plays in civil society.
- Information resource accessible for the public.
- A book on the everyday forms of civic activeness, which may be used by actors in the civic sector but also for the training of high school and university students.

Thus, in the course of its implementation, the project will become part of the process of civic education in Bulgaria, a process that has proven to be one of the most significant elements for the building of a dynamic and vibrant civil society.

Project team

The project is carried out by the Bulgarian Sociological Association and supported by the Trust for Civil Society for Central and Eastern Europe

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