Agnieszka Ziętek*

"They don't work with people"**. The authorities and civil society in contemporary Serbia

„Oni nie współpracują z ludźmi". Władza a społeczeństwo obywatelskie we współczesnej Serbii

Summary: The article discusses the condition of civil society in contemporary Serbia, with special emphasis on the relations between its representatives and the authorities (both at the local and state level). The main objective of the analyses is to answer the question of the position of the civil sector within Serbia's broadly understood political system. What role do both formal non-governmental organizations and grassroots non-institutionalized social movements play in this relatively young democracy? What is the attitude of the authorities to grassroots civil activities, which often manifest criticism towards the decisions and actions of those in power? These questions will constitute the central axis of my considerations in this article.

The research problem indicated above is analysed on two essential levels. Firstly, the article discusses existing studies and research on the nature of civil society in Serbia and the ways in which it functions. Secondly, the author analyses the results of qualitative research carried out at the late 2018 and early 2019 among representatives of Serbian civil movements and organizations. The conclusions stemming from these analyses are presented in the final part of the article.

The analyses carried out indicate the problems that face the civil sector in Serbia. First and foremost, one should draw attention to the authorities' rather negative view of the civil sector. What is also noteworthy is an extended network of connections of the authorities with the private sector as well as with right-wing, nationalist, pro-government organizations. These circumstances to a large extent hinder or even preclude dialogue (and further cooperation) between public and civil institutions.

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Streszczenie: Artykuł podejmuje zagadnienie kondycji społeczeństwa obywatelskiego we współczesnej Serbii, a w szczególności relacji jego przedstawicieli z władzami (zarówno na poziomie lokalnym, jak też krajowym). Główny cel prowadzonych analiz koncentruje się wokół uzyskania odpowiedzi na pytanie o pozycję sektora obywatelskiego w szeroko rozumianym systemie politycznym Serbii; jaką rolę w dość „młodej" demokracji pełnią zarówno formalne organizacje pozarządowe, jak też oddolne, niezinstytucjonalizowane ruchy społeczne, a także jaki jest stosunek władz do oddolnych aktywności obywatelskich, często krytycznych wobec decyzji i działań realizowanych przez rządzących – to główne pytania wyznaczające tok prowadzonych w artykule rozważań.

Wskazany problem badawczy analizowany jest na dwóch zasadniczych płaszczyznach. Po pierwsze, Autorka przytacza istniejące w literaturze przedmiotu rozpoznania teoretyczne dotyczące kształtu i sposobu funkcjonowania społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Serbii. W części drugiej, przywoływane i analizowane są wyniki badań jakościowych realizowanych na przełomie 2018 i 2019 roku wśród przedstawicieli ruchów i organizacji obywatelskich w Serbii.

Przeprowadzone analizy wskazują na problemy, z jakimi boryka się sektor obywatelski we współczesnej Serbii. Przede wszystkim należy tu zwrócić uwagę na dość negatywny sposób postrzegania przez władze Serbii organizacji sektora obywatelskiego. Uwagę zwraca również mocno rozbudowana sieć powiązań pomiędzy władzami a zarówno sektorem prywatnym, jak też wspomnianymi już organizacjami prawicowymi, nacjonalistycznymi i prorządowymi. Okoliczności te w znacznym stopniu utrudniają lub nawet niejednokrotnie uniemożliwiają dialog (a w dalszej kolejności współpracę) pomiędzy podmiotami publicznymi a obywatelskimi.

Słowa kluczowe: społeczeństwo obywatelskie, ruchy oddolne, partycypacja, współczesna Serbia

Introduction

A developed and well-functioning civil society is one of the pillars of the contemporary democratic system[1]. For this reason, it seems imperative to study the relations between the sector of civil activity (both organized and informal) and the sector of the authorities and the system of public/state institutions within which grassroots civil activities are realized. These relations seem particularly interesting in states that are undergoing a socio-political transformation, such as the states of what used to be called people's democracy bloc. The change of the political system in their case goes hand in hand with the need for the transformation of civil activity, and an increase in civil awareness and involvement – that is, the appearance of behaviours that may be

termed civic political culture[2]. It is such attitudes and activities that can, on the one hand, constitute the driving force behind modern democracy and civil society, while on the other being a natural defence mechanism against potential threats to the democratic system (for example, in the form of totalitarian rule)[3].

The article discusses the civil society in contemporary Serbia, with special emphasis on the relations between its representatives and the authorities (both at the local and state levels). My main research question concerns the position of the civil sector within Serbia's broadly understood political system. What role do both formal non-governmental organizations and grassroots non-institutionalized social movements play in this relatively young democracy? What is the attitude of authorities to grassroots civil activities, which often manifest criticism towards the decisions and actions of those in power? These questions will constitute the central axis of my considerations in this article.

The research problem indicated above is analysed on two essential levels. Firstly, the article discusses existing studies and research on the nature of civil society in Serbia and the ways in which it functions. Secondly, in turn, it analyses the results of qualitative research carried out at the late 2018 and early 2019 among representatives of Serbian civil movements and organizations. The conclusions stemming from these analyses are presented in the final part of the article.

1. Civil society in Serbia from a theoretical perspective

As has been noted in the introductory part of this article, active and involved members of society are not only an emanation of civic political culture but also constitute a foundation and guarantee of democratic order in the state. There may be various contexts and analytical perspectives employed to describe this type of activity.

Existing scholarship on the issue makes it possible to identify four major perspectives in the study of civil society in Serbia, which I would

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[2] On political culture, see G. Almond, S. Verba, *Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, Princeton 1963.

[3] See e.g. R. Putnam, R. Leonardi, R.Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, New Jersey 1994.

term ideological, normative, political, and institutional. Each of them will be analysed in the subsequent part of this article.

An ideological perspective in the analysis of grassroots social activity refers to the liberal theory of civil society. It places emphasis on the perception of this sphere as a platform/source of the so-called hegemonic strategy[4]. It addresses "political and cultural process of persuasion in which broad consent for neoliberal globalization and restructuring, which favours especially the domestic and transnational elites and (some) middle classes, is being built by articulating this transformation as a comprehensive modernization in 'general interest'"[5]. In other words, the idea of civil society proposed by "modern" Europe and the USA is a mere tool safeguarding their dominant position in the new world order[6] and their neoliberal attitude to the economy and the public sphere, including public sectoral policies. Representatives of the civil sector (regardless of the forms of their activity and the level of their formalization) are treated in this perspective as "agents" of the global neoliberal system and of the states that this system serves so that they can realize their individual goals and reap the benefits (at the expense of the interests of individual nation-states). This approach at the same time rules out the possibility of the existence in the public sphere of other, alternative models of social or civil activity based, among other things, on national values[7].

4   This refers to Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, whereby the dominant ideology is a source of cultural content that enhances the status quo and enables specific social groups/classes to remain in power. Within the context of this article, it denotes international/global relations and the dominance of given political/economic/social/normative systems over others. See e.g. A. Gramsci, *Zeszyty filozoficzne*, S. Krzemień-Ojak (ed.), Warsaw 1991; T.R. Bates, *Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony*, "Journal of the History of Ideas" 1975, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 351-366.

5   M. Mikuš, *Civil Society and EU Integration of Serbia: Toward a Historical Anthropology of Globalizing Postsocialist Europe*, [in:] *Rethinking Ethnography in Central Europe*, H. Cervinkova, M. Buchowski, Z. Uherek (eds.), New York 2015, pp. 158-159.

6   By "new" I mean the post-Cold War order shaped after 1989, in which the United States and the European Union assumed the roles of world leaders. See e.g. T. Okraska, *Ewolucja ładu światowego w okresie pozimnowojennym (zarys problemu)*, "Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis" 2013, vol. 11; R. Kuźniar, *Pozimnowojenne Dwudziestolecie 1989–2010,* Warsaw 2011.

7   I. Spasic, *Civil Society in Serbia after Milošević: Between Authoritarianism and Wishful Thinking*, "Polish Sociological Review" 2003, no. 4(144), p. 459. It is worth pointing out that this "anti-liberal" discourse (that is discourse questioning the need to realize values viewed as democratic) may be treated by those in positions of power in an exclusively instrumental way. To put it differently, democratic procedures and mechanisms of the functioning of the state and society may be perceived as inherently ineffective and unconducive to economic growth. In this case, "anti-dem-

The normative perspective offers a somewhat similar outlook, referring to a specific set of liberal values identified in the dominant global discourse with democratic rule. This perspective turns out to be particularly valid with reference to the states of the erstwhile socialist bloc (in particular to the states of Eastern and Central Europe and to the Balkans) and their transformation to the liberal democratic system. It was to a large degree civil organizations that became at that time a synonym for and an advocate of democratic values, such as freedom of opinion and its public expression, human rights, independence of the media, public debate, etc.[8] In this way, non-governmental organizations in Serbia were to some extent identified with the new system and the world neoliberal order. This narrative was accompanied by a conviction that organizations referring to Serbia's national heritage were to be excluded from this group of "civil" organizations. As some scholars see it, "on another, less visible analytic level, it is implied that the civil society that is actually meant consists of only some organizations, aiming at some political objectives and promoting some values. In reality, however, nothing warrants the automatism of this 'democratic assumption'"[9].

Serbian civil society and the non-governmental organizations that represent it may also be analysed from the political perspective, which is to some extent an offshoot of the ideological approach. Two aspects need to be pointed out in this respect.

Firstly, the politicization of some of civil organizations is related to their crucial involvement in the downfall of Slobodan Milošević's regime in 2000:

> While voter support for a united opposition remained strong, during the year 2000 the primacy was taken over by the idea of a united social opposition, i.e. a joining of all democratic forces in the society – NGOs, independent trade unions, civic initiatives, prominent individuals, universities, independent media, and democratically minded people at large – in the fight against the Milošević

ocratic discourse" will be justified with the necessity to rebuild and strengthen economy based on the principles of laissez-faire market. See A. Matković, M. Ivković, *Neoliberal Instrumentalism and the Fight Against It: The "We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own" Movement*, "East European Politics" 2018, vol. 34, pp. 1-2.

8   A. Fagan, M. Ostojic, *The UE and Civil Society in Serbia: Governance Rather Than Politics,* "Balkanologie" 2008, vol. 11, no. 1-2, pp. 1-2, http://journals.openedition.org/balkanologie/1393 [15.05.2022].

9   I. Spasic, op. cit., p. 456.

regime. (…) It was very important that the campaign in its organizational base was highly decentralized: local NGOs were active in their local milieus, identifying local problems and concerns and relating them to one and the same general cause – namely, the regime itself[10].

In 2000, organizations that were theoretically positioned beyond the realm of politics became one of the major forces resisting the authoritarian rule of the then president, as well as an important element of the antigovernment, prodemocratic campaign to overthrow Milošević. Because of that, they were perceived as centres of oppositional activity.

Secondly, in subsequent years, in the wake of their involvement in the events of 2000, civil organizations – especially those that disagreed with the government's policies and criticized its decisions and actions – became an object of suspicion of oppositional or even antistate activity. The situation was exacerbated by the existing financing mechanisms, with sources of funding frequently located outside the country. This, coupled with the often critical attitude of the active representatives of the civil sector towards the directions and actions of the government, led to the classification of representatives of civil society as "agents of Western influence" or "elitist activists" manifesting a Western way of thinking. Civil sector organizations themselves were perceived as antinational or anti-Serbian[11]. This perspective frequently correlated with the ideological one: active grassroots movements and non-governmental organizations opposing the policies of the authorities in Belgrade were termed traitors and "enemies of the Serbian nation", allegedly acting on behalf of neoliberal Western interests in the global order.

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10   Ibidem, p. 451.
11   The fact that CSOs in Serbia seem detached from the rest of society and its problems further aggravates the situation. This stems, among other causes, from substantial concentration on the realization of "projects" and the use of esoteric language that is not always clear or accessible to an average recipient (e.g. expressions such as participation, human rights, social minorities, exclusion, multiculturalism, and the like). Because of that, CSOs are frequently perceived as being severed from the reality and needs of ordinary people. See A. Fagan, M. Ostojic, op. cit., pp. 2-12; I. Spasic, op. cit., p. 459; A. Ziętek, M. Lewicki, M. Rogaczewska, *Stimulating Social and Economic Development through Culture: An Analysis of Twelve Cultural Initiatives Oriented Towards Transforming Their Local Environment*, [in:] *Culture and Development: Beyond Neoliberal Reason*, I. Stokfiszewski (ed.), Warsaw 2017.

Finally, the institutional approach signals the presence of strong connections between the structures of public administration and its individual bodies and the representatives of non-governmental organizations. This perspective brings to light two major issues.

First of all, the cooperation between the authorities and the civil sector oftentimes assumes extreme forms: representatives of public authorities not only perceive experts from the non-governmental sector as mere providers of services, but may go as far as to instrumentalize the latter's knowledge, skills, and experiences stemming from their work for various projects (frequently realized with the use of external funds, such as pre-accession funds). In the context of the state administration's focus on the accession process to EU structures, the skills of representatives of the civil sector turned out to be extremely valuable, even essential. On the other hand, in light of limited career opportunities for young, well-educated professionals and representatives of intellectual elites, such cooperation and capitalization of one's experience and skills gained while working for NGOs became an attractive proposition, in extreme cases leading to a sort of dependence on opportunities (including financial ones) offered by the public sector.

Strong connections between "young professionals" and a well-educated middle class stemmed from the fact that "establishing and working in NGOs in [sic] was an economic and political strategy of the old middle class of professionals and intellectuals, especially those younger and fluent in English, which had been severely impoverished by Milošević's war economy and clientelistic privatization. Logically, then, they saw a divorce with the legacy of Milošević – for which the "return to Europe" has become a catchall metaphor – as in their vital interest"[12].

Secondly, these relations are often accompanied by corruption. Unclear connections between representatives of state and local authorities as well as a frequent lack of transparency in the allocation of public funds are major problems faced not only by Serbia but also by other Western Balkan states[13].

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12   M. Mikuš, op. cit., p. 10.
13   A. Fagan, *Europe's Balkan Dilemma: Paths to Civil Society or State-Building?*, London 2010, pp. 30, 53-74.

2. Results of Qualitative Research

Field research that forms the core of my analysis in this article was carried out in Belgrade at the late 2018 and early 2019 to study the condition of the civil sector in Serbia, especially in the context of its relation to Serbian authorities. The main research problem was the position, image, and possibilities of the representatives of civil society within the broadly understood Serbian public sphere. My research was of a two-fold character. On the one hand, it comprised the analysis of existing data (desk research) in the form of reports and analyses of the issues under study here prepared by European institutions (among others, the European Commission) or international NGOs (e.g. Amnesty International or Freedom House). On the other hand, field research was conducted in the form of in-depth interviews with representatives of the civil sector in Serbia, particularly in Belgrade (including both informal grassroots movements and institutionalized non-governmental organizations). Altogether, 15 people took part in the interviews[14], adding up to approximately 30 hours of recorded material. The questions asked in individual in-depth interviews pertained, among other topics, to the authorities' attitudes to and perception of representatives of the civil sector, mutual relations between representatives of civil society and the public sector, as well as opportunities for potential cooperation and involvement of the social sector in decision-making processes.

The analysis of the collected material made it possible to formulate several conclusions. First and foremost, the theoretical formulations of the four major approaches to the analysis of the civil sector in Serbia were corroborated.

The respondents particularly frequently underscored the ideological foundation of the authorities' criticism of NGOs and their members:

"Around that time [when the activists were protesting] a small campaign started against us. So, let's say, some of the tabloid newspapers, like *Informer*

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[14]   All the respondents were selected through a non-probability sampling method called snowball. It has to be emphasized that the respondent sample in my study was not representative, and thus the results of my research should not be extrapolated onto other population groups. Still, it may be assumed that the main trajectories and tendencies are very likely to appear in the case of other representatives of the civil sector in Serbia.

or *Telegraf*, started, like, literally tearing us apart. Like us, individuals, starting, doing, inventing stories, shaming… They really couldn't find anything on us, because we were just regular, nothing special. For example, they Googled me and found out that I worked in the foundation, and the foundation was founded, 15 years ago, by Soros". [resp. no. 10]

"When you have something against some decision-makers, it's really easy to […] make that person a betrayer of the nation". [resp. no. 3]

"A very important factor for the state of affairs is how the reputation of civil society is spoken of by the government's leader, because in the last 7 years [2012–2019] when we had the new party ruling the state, the main decision-makers, the main political leaders are talking bad things about us, civil society again, for example that civil society activists are Marxists, and its founding by Soros… like the enemies, international intruders, betrayers. And it's a kind of problem when you need to communicate, because when you speak with the regular citizens […], first reaction is OK, if you work in [a] non-governmental organization, you are against the government and also you are paid by foreign money to do some bad things". [resp. no. 3]

Such an attitude to the civil sector is also characteristic of right-wing, nationalist organizations and parties:

"When you are public and you have these right-oriented groups which are against us and put us always in the centre of interest, especially dealing with the money and taking money from abroad, so you are here like betrayers. […] It's very tricky manipulation what the government does, and toward the civil movement, it's very dangerous because they build the picture, together with the media, that we are betrayers, we don't like Serbia, that we are not patriots or something like that". [resp. no. 12]

"There are lots of organizations which are nationalist NGOs connected with the right-wing parties and recently they published a list of civil society activists who are betrayers of the nation and they, for example, they had a conference and the prime minister went to the conference and participated there". [resp. no. 3]

In the context of the normative analysis of Serbia's civil society, the respondents accentuated their attachment to democratic values,

which positioned them, in their view, in opposition to Serbian authorities (both state and local):

> "We decided not to make any deal with the government because we, first of all, refuse to collaborate with the fascist system – it doesn't matter if they called themselves 'democrats'. They are not democrats. And democracy here doesn't exist in the sense we would like. It exists in the sense that you can say everything that you want, you know, like we still don't all of us end up in jail. But slowly, you see, the people who say something on Twitter against the president will go to jail. The people who are small but against this political party – they find something to put them in jail. A very dangerous situation for us, activists. So how can you collaborate with this system? […] We don't make compromises with the government". [resp. no. 12]

What is more, the respondents emphasized the distance between the public sector and the civil sector:

> "For example, in Serbia we have quite a big gap between what is happening in the independent culture, like civil society, and public institutions. Why? This gap has been created and preserved by the policymakers since 2000, because for the government, it was the way to keep control and to keep this gap, let's say, a kind of tension, to prevent getting together, to prevent people from uniting for the same goals". [resp. no. 8]

The political perspective uncovered in field research pertained primarily to the authorities' treatment of the civil sector in terms of political opposition, and of their representatives as political opponents:

> "They [the authorities] view us like political opponents. This is nothing new […] It's been very common since I can remember. If you have someone who is openly critical […] you don't treat him as a stakeholder in the process, which we are. They don't accept this". [resp. no. 6]

> "[The civil sector is] like one small island of opposition. Of course, during these 19 years there were different policies, different ministers, some were more collaborative, some were less, but it has always been difficult because they actually didn't want to really change the system. And this is the problem in general". [resp. no. 8]

"When we protested, they say that we are basically being paid by the opposition party to undermine the the authorities. After that, the repression started to increase". [resp. no. 2]

"What is happening here, very often associations are treated as a political opposition. So not even ignored, but like an opposition". [resp. no. 6]

"All the protests were addressing the right to the city – it's our topic – but they were understood as a protest against the government". [resp. no. 4]

At least three major issues may be pinpointed within the institutional approach: a) the public sector's use of the skills and intellectual capital of civil organizations, b) corruption and ties with the private sector and right-wing organizations, c) the aspect of the financing of the civil sector and cooperation between public and civil institutions.

The respondents emphasize that the authorities are, in a way, forced to cooperate with representatives of civil organizations on account of the fact that qualified employees are hard to recruit:

"Actually, almost all of the expertise […] in Serbia comes from the independent sector. So when they [the authorities] want to do something, especially in the international arena, they have to invite them [the independent sector]". [resp. no. 6]

Apart from "using" the social capital of civil organizations, public institutions generally do not show interest in cooperation with the representatives of CSO:

"It is not some kind of accident, but all the civil society organizations, which would like to have some critical approach on that process, when you give comments to the legislation where you would like to emphasize that some point is not good for the citizens or well-being, there is like a huge reduction in any kind of cooperation". [resp. no. 3]

Corruption constitutes a major problem not only in the relations between the authorities and the sector of independent civil organizations, but in the whole public sphere in Serbia. The majority of the respondents pointed out the substantial extent to which corruption exists:

"You might not have such problems with the corruption. People with good skills and good education actually have real problems with getting to, let's say, a post in public institutions because everything is being corrupted. The ruling party is putting the people that don't have the right education to do anything, but they go to the government, and then get from the government some job in the smallest public institutions in the south of Serbia [...] This octopus of corruption is occurring deep down, as well as at the local level". [resp. no. 5]

"So this way we have corruption, we have partocracy, we have complete control of the ruling party over the entire public system, from top down. And this is why we cannot find common ground, we cannot establish dialogue, we simply speak about different worlds". [resp. no. 8]

The process of financing the activities of civil society organizations is vital, both in terms of the functioning and development of civil society and in terms of corruption. As the respondents emphasize, the main sources of their funding are located abroad. This stems primarily from the scant – or downright non-existent – financial support that the civil sector organizations get from public funds:

"For us the main sources of funding are still foreign donors. On the one side, the European Commission […] but also cooperation with the EU programmes which are opened for Serbia, such as Erasmus Plus […] On the other side, we have Europe for Citizens support […] and we try to get in contact and to get some support from different kinds of donors […] for example the Embassy of Sweden. We also have support from the Rockefeller Brothers, also from the government […] We used to cooperate with them, but now we don't have any support from them. I think now we don't have any support from the government. So it is usually from international foundations, [the] EU and [the] USA". [resp. no. 3]

"We've been trying to get support [from the government], especially for some projects that we develop with a lot of experts in the field for doing more in-depth surveys and analyses of public open calls in Serbia on different levels of government […] We were on the reserve list several times, but we never got [the funding], which is unexplainable basically, because our projects were, I think, much better than many of those that were awarded". [resp. no. 6]

The respondents claim that representatives of the authorities some-times establish their own NGOs so as to collect additional funding for their political activity:

"We were doing for years, like, an analysis of the open calls for the funding of the NGOs at the city level and at the national level. In 2016, at the city level, I discovered, like, a third or maybe even more of the NGOs were either pri-vate companies or organizations that don't exist, or organizations that are very close to the government [...] So, when you check who they [the author-ities] are supporting, they are basically supporting themselves". [resp. no. 4]

A lot of suspicion is generated by unclear relationships between representatives of the authorities and private companies for the sake of legitimization of the former's actions or to raise additional funds establishes for an NGOs:

"They [the private sector] are creating the space of the civil sector even with the proclamation of the status and they started to establish NGOs. They actu-ally establish [an NGO] by the state or people that are close to the state some-times, so they are establishing an NGO, so an NGO is this kind of profile and they are using the grants and resources from the independent sector. And this way also obstructing the development of independent sector, which is, as we all know, already important for the democratic state". [resp. no. 5]

"It's pretty obvious what is going on. They did similar things in culture. For ex-ample, when they made local projects [...] they have an organization, which was registered just before the end of the deadline, get the money". [resp. no. 1]

"They [the private sector] have more influence on the public institutions, and the process of lobbying happens". [resp. no. 9]

"They have started to promote this cultural industry approach to culture, so the private business sector in culture, giving them more space, giving them even the funding, giving them credits and promoting them as models of how it should all work, now and in the future. So in this way they [the authorities] created these views that we have some interests, there are other interests, and that we are a kind of enemies, which is not true". [resp. no. 8]

According to the respondents, such relationships occur, somewhat clandestinely, also between the authorities and right-wing, nationalist organizations:

"The right wing forming its own NGO […] to fulfil the necessary role so that the government would say what we have in the third sector So we have NGOs, we have civil society, we have youth activity. This is a simulated discussion between the society and government. And when they [the authorities] need to follow some money into their own hands, they form these collectives, for example, a collective for art, for culture, etc., and they are following money". [resp. no. 9]

As my research shows, problems with corruption – including in the civil sector – are not likely to be solved by Serbia's integration with the EU: "I don't think joining the EU will solve the problem of corruption. I think this is a problem of poverty and I understand why the problem of corruption is happening at some level, because people sometimes perceive corruption as the only way they can survive in this system". [resp. no. 11]

"In the last few years, pro-governmental organizations have emerged that are basically governmental organizations, even though they are called NGOs. They are mostly national or right-wing oriented. … They [the government] are building their own structures in the public sector, the private sector, and the NGO sector". [resp.no. 4]

This leads to situations in which the participation of representatives of independent organizations and civil groups is substantially hampered, if not downright precluded. The respondents themselves draw attention to this fact:

"You have those public inquires on like public discussions on laws and action plans and strategies, but usually it's like a simulation of the democratic process. They make consultations, but usually they ignore your reactions". [resp. no. 4]

"The administration is not open to any dialogue, because, I think, they have a kind of irrational fear of the field of knowledge that is not theirs". [resp. no.8]

Conclusion

The analysis conducted both through desk research and qualitative field research (individual in-depth interviews) makes it possible to determine a relatively substantial compatibility of the theoretical findings with the studies and analyses presented in international organizations' reports.

The findings on the problems that the civil sector in Serbia faces have been corroborated to a large extent. First and foremost, one should draw attention to the authorities' rather negative outlook on the civil sector. Frequently, CSOs that criticize the actions of the government (both state and local) face ostracism, funding cuts, and accusations of "antinational" activities. Hence, the civil sector gets politicized in a way, as it is identified by the government with antigovernment opposition. This is frequently accompanied by accusations levelled against civil organizations that they act to the detriment of the state through their alleged ties to the "neoliberal West", which is claimed to threaten national interests. In this way, the civil sector finds itself in a checkmate of sorts: on the one hand, due to its criticism of the government's decisions, it is refused funding from the state budget, while on the other, it is exposed to charges and accusations when it makes use of external funding. The situation is further exacerbated by the cooperation of the authorities and right-wing, nationalist organizations in this procedure, with the latter benefitting (including financially) from such a state of affairs.

What is also noteworthy is the extended network of connections of the authorities with the private sector as well as with the right-wing, nationalist, pro-government organizations. These connections often go hand in hand with activities that lack transparency, especially in the context of money flows (e.g. the funding of organizations with no experience, which were created mere days or weeks before the deadline for applications to get funding for specific activities).

These circumstances to a large extent hinder or even preclude dialogue (and further cooperation) between public and civil institutions, which is one of the main traits and principles of the democratic system. This leads to situations in which "there are no opportunities for real participation in the decision-making process" [resp.no. 4]. As the respondents accentuate, "the space for formal participation is very, very narrow, is non-existent" [resp.no. 9]; "Civil society is here a kind

of controlled space for the public policies" [resp.no. 8]; "Centralization is ongoing, it's really devastating" [resp.no. 10]. As a result, some believe it is necessary to work outside the "system" of formal non-governmental organizations (e.g. in informal movements): "The perspective of civil society is outside the NGOs, it's outside the existing structures" [resp. no. 9]. It seems, nevertheless, that regardless of the forms of civil activity, it is necessary to implement in Serbia mechanisms that would enable greater transparency of grassroots activities as well as their independence and financial stability. This will enable the development of an autonomous and well-functioning civil sector, which in turn will have a positive impact on the state of democracy in the country.

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