

Civil Society and the NGO Sector in Romania and Hungary

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Abstract:

Our study offers an overview of the situation of NGO sector in Romania and Hungary. The first part presents a general outlook concerning the theoretical framework developed around the concept of civil society. In the second part, our paper proceeds to a historical comparative analysis of the emergence and development of the NGO sector in two neighboring countries, which went through a transition from totalitarian regime to democracy. In the final part we sum up our conclusions and we propose several measures, which could improve the status and effectiveness of NGO's

Keywords: *civil society, NGO, Romania, Hungary, transition*

What is civil society?

Civil society is a widely used term, especially after the fall of the Iron Curtain in the Central and Eastern Europe. It is possible to find this concept in Sociology, Political Science, Anthropology, History or Philosophy. Moreover, reading the newspapers, we discover the use of this term in many articles. As the British anthropologist Chris Hann argues, in the eighties the civil society gained a very important position in the international intellectual debate, which has been employed in order to discuss social transformations in various parts of the world, from post-communist Eastern Europe to African post-colonial states and Kemalist Turkish Republic. In the nineties invoking civil society was not any more the exclusive attribute of the elite of the philosophers and political historians. The term was used to make the discourse of the politicians and journalists more influential in various circumstances (Hann, C, 1995, p.158). The same author mentions that during one of his visits in the United States, he had been told that the civil society had become a vital concept for the project applicants in the field of Social Sciences, especially to those who applied for the support of organizations such as USAID (Hann, C, 1995, p.158).

As John Hall demonstrates in his book *The Civil Society*, the deepest roots of the civil society are tied to the division of the centralized authority of Rome, a division between the ideological power and the political power (the segregation between the Pope's power and the political power). Another source for the civil society is the autonomy of the towns towards the royalty – the towns were islands in the feudal space where new ideas and practices could flourish. The third root of the civil society should be the segregation of the Protestant Church from the papacy (Hall, J, 1995, p.4).

If the civil society gained some degree of self-consciousness over time, its role was largely augmented by the changes in communication means. The social self-organization meant a shift from the popular, unwritten literature to the printed cultural mass creation. The horizontal connections in society, free of state control, has been expanded to a large extent in the 18th century and they are symbolized by a series of institutions, from coffee houses to barber shops, where journals could be read and discussed. The sources of