

Lobbies, interest groups and representation issues: a Bulgarian experience

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Contrary to expectations, the development of Central-East European (CEE) societies after 1990 did not simply reproduce Western models. The transition has not only been longer than expected, but much more complicated and original. This generalization applies in full to the issue of “interest groups”. On the basis of analysed experience, we can identify two main sources, which condition the appearance of interest groups and also shape their aims and forms.

The *first* is the gradual, Europe-wide withdrawal of public trust in, and identification with, classic representation mechanisms such as political parties and the nation state. An ever-increasing number of interests, groups and communities decide that their agendas are best served by direct participation in the arena of decision-making.

This picture is fully resonant also in the CEE region. With the exception of newly-emerging nation states (Slovenia, Baltics), where the government and political parties enjoy high levels of trust and identification, through the region trust in government and politicians is thin, following the experiences of communism and the fragile politics (plus corruption and ineptitude) after its collapse.

But in the CEE region there is also an additional, *second* source of interest groups, and that is a side-product of the revival of the problematic of “civil society”, which took place in this region, not in the West, in the 1980s. This second source is the conviction of a whole generational cohort that government and political parties are in principle, objectively, by their very nature incapable of ensuring representation of all issues and agendas. The idea that your agenda is best attained by being directly represented, as the result of good organization and influence over the public, is what fuelled the 1990s “boom” in NGOs. From the beginning NGOs were not a sideshow – a collection of enthusiasts serving causes that have been left to the sidelines of politics. The NGOs of the CEE region recruited considerable, national and international-level talent and capacity. Thereby they gained impressive decision-making leverage, out-performing, in terms of real power, the actors of the classic Anglo-German inheritance (employer associations, trades unions).

On top of this comes the issue of minorities. Experience – pre-communist, communist and post-communist – has convinced ethnic and other minorities that if they want effective representation, they find direct access. Some of these organizations have become political parties of ethnic minorities, in order to stabilize representation and participation at the centre of power. Such is the case, for example, with Albanian representation in Macedonia and Turkish – in Bulgaria.

There is a dark side to this. The habit of finding representation outside the channels of representative democracy creates opportunities for dangerous groups to be also influential and penetrate into power. Such is the case of various semi-legal and clearly criminal groups, mostly based on contraband and piracy, who find influence through bribery and media influence. Part of the dark side are also organized groups that are survivors of the old communist secret services seeking influence. Frequently they form alliances with organized crime on the one hand, and with their old pay-masters from Russia on the other, in this way becoming a threat to national and regional security.