

The situation of independent civil society in Central Europe and in Hungary

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The role of civil society in healthy democracies

Civil society, composed of *registered* and *informal* organizations and groups, self-organizing citizens

- promote and facilitate the **application of principles and values** of freedoms, individual rights, and the rule of law on all levels;
- **contribute to good governance**, transparency and openness of governments;
- **provision missing services**, state tasks and functions, in fields e.g. education, social/health care.
- **help communities to organize themselves** and in mobilizing them for the public good.

The phenomenon of shrinking civil space

2015 report by the global alliance CIVICUS found serious violations of the freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly in 109 countries.

These include

- › **direct actions against CSOs** (raids on premises; attacking staff; restrictive regulations/laws; confiscating documents, technical facilities; etc);
- › **hampering peaceful gathering for citizens** (denial of permissions for gathering, not protecting protestors, use of police, new security laws);
- › **hindering access to information** (restrictive media laws; attacking editorship, journalists, bloggers; censorship; criminal law)

... at Europe's doorsteps

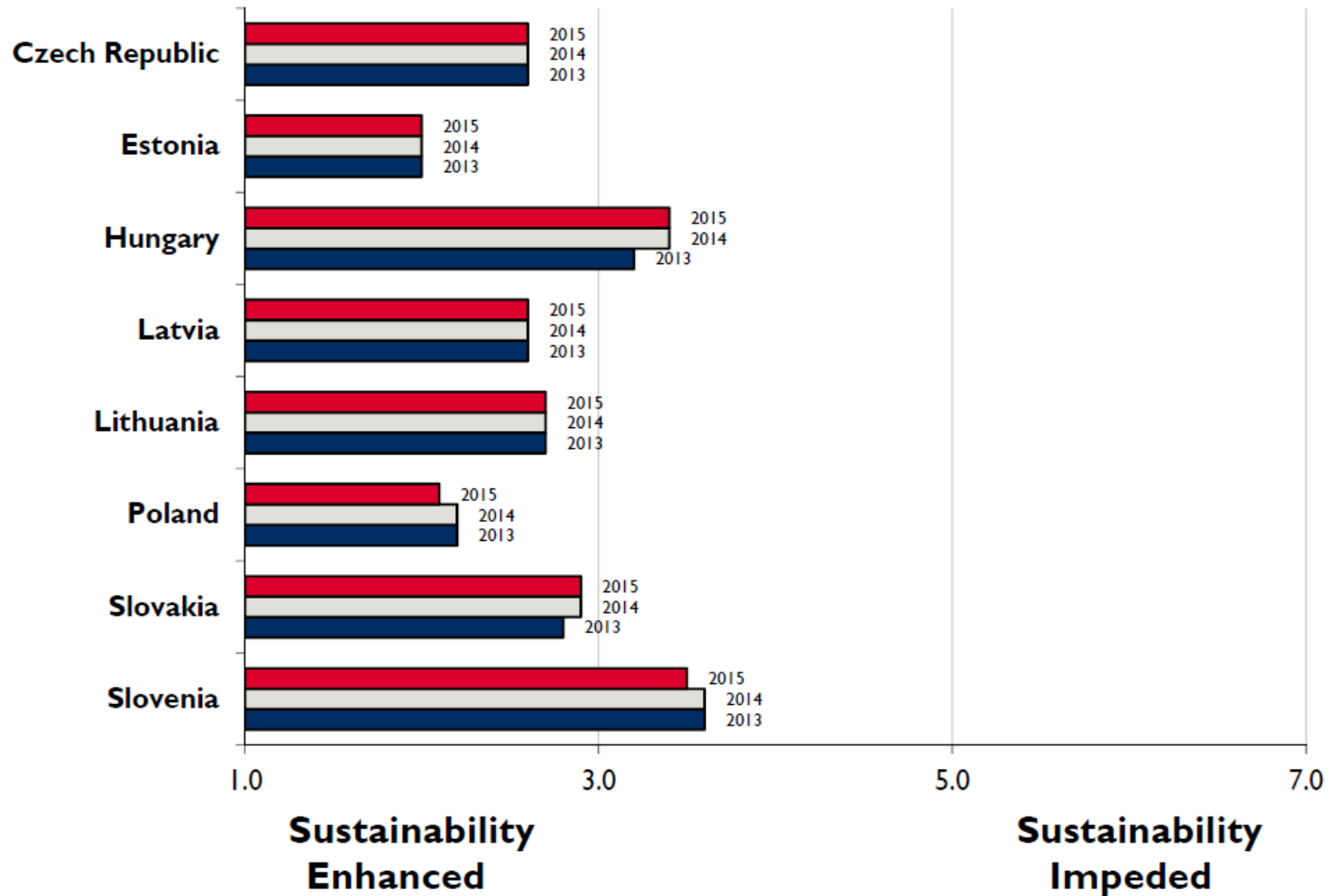
Examples:

- *Macedonia* - attacks on oppositional politicians and civil society activists
- *Moldova* - demonstrations against corruption, LGBTQI related actions
- *Poland* - weakened civil society freedoms

http://www.civicus.org/images/CSW_Report.pdf

„...the possible transition to democracy that has been underway in the region for nearly a quarter century - of which the development of civil society is an integral part - is not inevitable or uni-directional. The growth of truly democratic institutions and civic space has been stunted in many countries, such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Russia, and eroding in others, such as Hungary and Macedonia.”

Northern Tier CSO Sustainability



The 2015 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia (United States Agency for International Development)

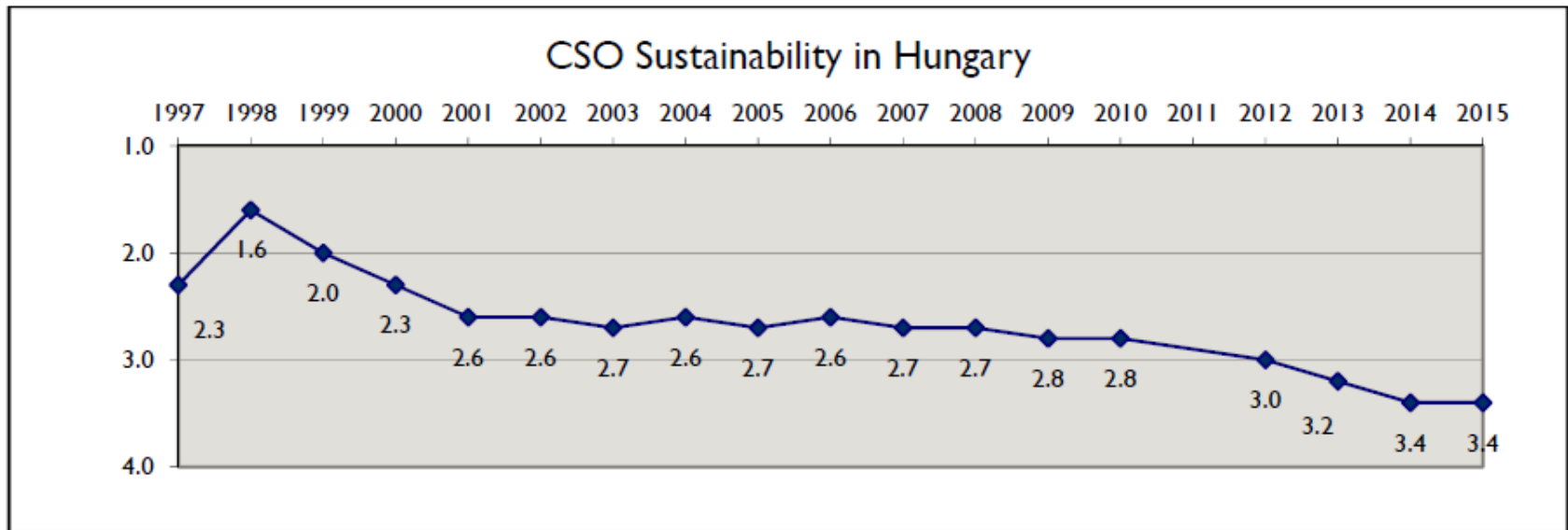
The development of Hungarian civil society I.

- **NGO sector's extensive growth in quantity after 1989**
- **American private and public philanthropy in the 90's**
- **diversification of organizations**
- **stabilization attempts of existing organizations after 2000**
- **legal environment of NGO sector, domestic resources - developed but without strategic goal**

The development of Hungarian civil society II.

- institutionalization, **stagnation** of existing organizations - strengthened by 2004 EU accession
- clear **grant dependency syndrome**, growing and loosing **strategic thinking**
- frozen frames for **employment**, the **cause disappears**
- **lacking** constituency, communication, **main conditions for sustainability and active citizenship**

Civil Society Sustainability Hungary



After a decade of relative stability (or in retrospect: stagnation) sudden changes, insecurity, deteriorating conditions shook the sector from 2011-12.

Symptoms and causes I.

Legal: new NGO Act (entry into force 2012) 

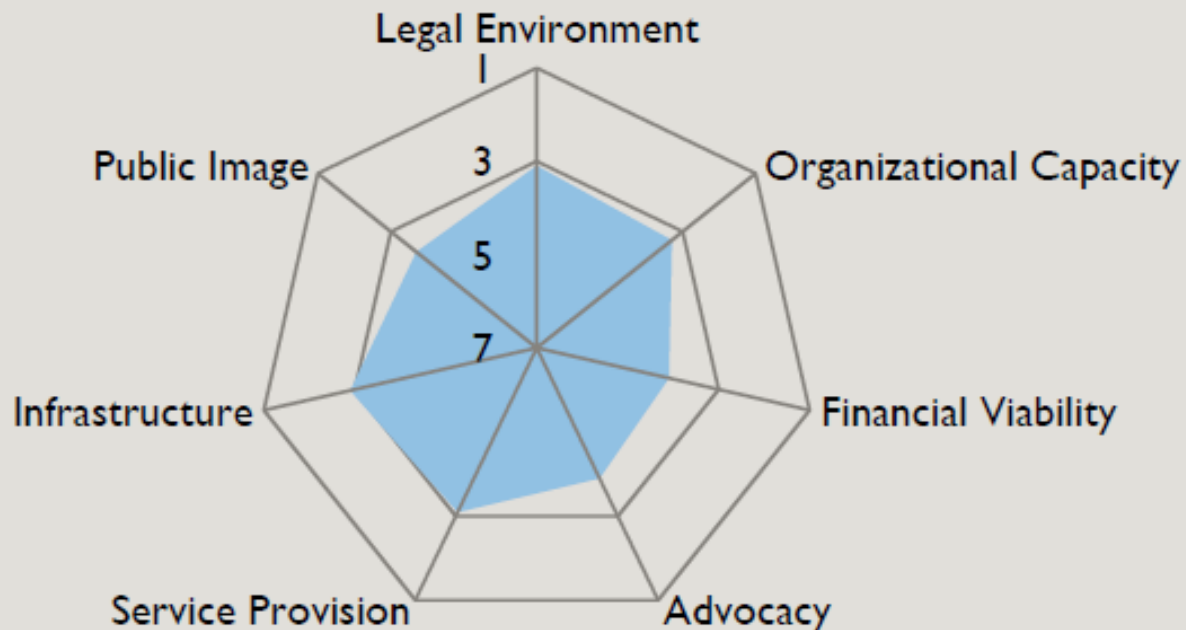
- > uncertainty and confusion among NGOs, endangered public benefit status;
- > political indifference and neglect of civil society;
- > tax benefits are almost non-existent;
- > little assistance in adapting to new conditions;
- > government decisions limiting civil society space, vilification, harassment and intimidation of independent NGOs.

Symptoms and causes II.

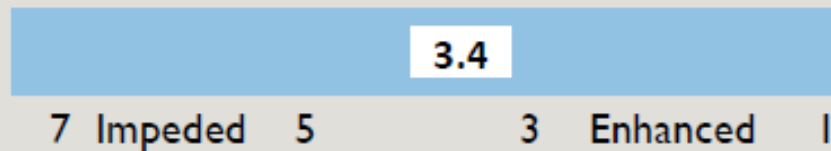
Financial: „no money” →

- National Cooperation Fund: decreasing state funding, biased decision-making processes;
- **limited access of NGOs to EU Structural Fund sources;**
- increasing financial administration and bureaucratic burdens;
- lack of / weak domestic, independent giving or philanthropy.

2015 CSO Sustainability Scores for Hungary



CSO Sustainability Stages and Country Dynamic



https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1861/EuropeEurasia_CSOSIReport_2015.pdf

Consequences

- No strategy, ad-hoc operation
- Erosion of achievements of past decade
- Well-functioning advocacy tools and methods became useless
- Fear to take action
- NGOs are cut out from providing services
- Little and weak regional and/or thematic networking, cooperation, growing gap between the capital and the countryside
- Government-created „representatives” of the NGO sector
- Government-led attempts to divide the sector - ‚good’ and bad’ NGOs
- NGOs close down operation

New trends

- Spread of informal groups and movements - giving voice to burning social issues that have no political representation
- More emphasis on volunteering, providing low-cost services
- Crowd sourcing and social enterprises - slow spread
- Beginnings of self-defense coalitions - slow
- Independent media tends to pay more attention to NGOs' initiatives (even small-scale ones)

NGOs need to find way back to the grassroots, to strengthen and mobilize their constituencies, build a mass basis for social change, communicate to and activate people.

They need support to change track, to adapt their operation to new, adverse circumstances, focus on community organizing, also considering re-development of regional networks.

Further reading

Report of Amnesty International Hungary: Their backs to the wall: civil society under pressure in Hungary

http://www.amnesty.hu/data/file/756-back_to_the_walls_eur270012015_en.pdf?version=1412429919

Thank you!
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