

Independent and Broader Civil Society in East-Central European Democratizations

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Abstract

Civil society is generally considered to be a major factor in the breakdowns of the communist regimes in East-Central Europe and their subsequent democratic consolidation, but scarce attention has been paid to the specific characteristics of this social domain in state socialist settings. This essay proposes to distinguish two different types of civil society in the communist polities. Independent civil society corresponds to standard Western notions of civil society as an autonomous sphere of associational life between state and family. The so-called broader civil society encompasses associational structures controlled by the communist state that form the infrastructure of what will become component parts of a standard civil society once transition to democracy occurs. Broader civil societies in state socialist countries can be decomposed into several segments that differ from each other in the nature of their relationship to the regime. It is claimed that broader civil society structures are more important for the consolidation of civil societies after 1989 than independent civil society.

Key words: Civil society, communist societies, transitions to democracy, democratic consolidation, East-Central Europe, East European dissent.

The demise of communism in East-Central Europe is frequently interpreted as a triumph of a severely oppressed, but inextinguishable civil society that, in favorable international and domestic conditions of the late 1980s, acquired the strength and size necessary to become one of the principal actors in the dramatic downfall of the communist regimes. The role of civil society in the 1989 events was no doubt highly significant, but what exactly is referred to

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when we speak about “civil society” in state socialist settings? And, one may also ask, what was the specific contribution of the structures of civil society existing before 1989 to the consolidation of democracy after 1989?

This essay attempts to answer both questions with the assistance of a modified definition of civil society that departs from those commonly used in the study of civil societies in the West, because, as will be argued below, the usual definitions are too demanding and they exclude many substandard, but nevertheless vital, elements of civil society existing in the state socialist countries. At the core of the revised definition is the distinction between an independent civil society that enjoys substantial autonomy from the communist party-state, and a broader civil society that is controlled by the state, but also represents a neutral social infrastructure for a possible future civil society. If independent civil society exists in an undemocratic country at all, it usually takes on the form of small cells of citizen activism or dissent. Broader civil society encompasses a variety of institutions and organizations that find themselves under varying degrees of state control. This distinction, it will be argued below, was not a widely accepted one in the political thinking of East-Central European dissidents in the 1970s and the 1980s, but it proves extremely useful in analyzing the political developments in the late post-totalitarian communist regimes and during their transition toward democracy.

The broader civil societies in state socialist countries can be decomposed into several segments that differ from each other in the nature of their relationship and their distance from the regime as well as in their potential to support or suppress antiregime activities. Each of these layers fulfilled specific functions within the political system of state socialism and they also contributed differently to the overthrow of the communist regimes in 1989. Whereas broader civil society represents the more passive and politically ambivalent setting of the deep changes leading toward the collapse of communism, independent civil society was engaged in actively challenging the regime. Both types of civil society were further embedded in dense networks of informal family and friendly ties that were crucial for the sustainability especially of the independent civil society.

One can also ask what the respective contributions of the broader and independent civil societies were to the consolidation of post-communist democracies. In contrast to what is usually claimed, the comparison across East-Central European and some (post-)Soviet countries presented in the conclusion of this essay indicates that the more decisive variable for explaining the successful development of civil society during democratic consolidation is the broader civil society, not the independent civil society. If this tentative conclusion is supported by further research, it might help to establish the study of civil society structures in the broadest sense possible as a useful addition¹

¹ One of the very few contributions to this literature that is also making an argument for the

to the burgeoning literature on the conditions of breakdown of nondemocratic regimes and successful transitions to democracy.

How Best to Approach Civil Society in State Socialism?

Civil society, alongside the related spheres of political society or economic society, is considered to be one of the essential fields in which democratic transition and consolidation takes place. Linz and Stepan regard civil society as “that arena of the polity where self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests.”² This standard definition is well suited to guide the study of developing civil societies during the process of democratization and under democratic conditions, but it is not the only one possible. This section attempts to develop a revisionist definition of civil society that will better reflect on some observable institutional continuities in the (post-)communist countries before and after 1989.

Any attempt to study civil societies in state socialist settings faces serious definitional problems. Most standard approaches regard civil society in this specific type of regime in the conventional way as the sphere occupying the space between the state and the family (the maximalist version, to use Víctor Pérez-Díaz’s typology of conceptions of civil society³), or possibly also (in the minimalist version) between the state, the family, and the market. Such a sphere is independent of the state and the family (and, for minimalist authors, the market, too) and obeys its own logic rather than the logic of the state power or kinship loyalties (or economic efficiency). Yet, the penetration of the party-state apparatus into society in state socialist systems was so deep and consequential, that there is hardly anything left for analysis if the criterion of independence from the state is applied with full rigor. One consequence of this approach is that many direct predecessors of today’s organizations of civil society disappear entirely from the picture. For instance, there is no reasonable way of looking at trade unions and many of the centralized mass organizations under state socialism as genuinely independent of the government. They are,

relevance of officially recognized associational structures under communism is David Lane, “Civil Society and the Imprint of State Socialism,” in *Participation of Civil Society in New Modes of Governance: The Case of the New EU Member States, Part 1: The State of Civil Society*, Working Papers of the Research Centre for East European Studies, No. 67, ed. Heiko Pleines (Bremen: Forschungsstelle Osteuropa, 2005), 7-15, http://www.eu-newgov.org/database/DELIV/D24D04_1of2_The_State_of_Civil_Society.pdf (accessed December 3, 2008). See also Buchowski and Kubik cited below.

² Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 7.

³ Víctor Pérez-Díaz, “The Public Sphere and a European Civil Society,” in *Real Civil Societies: Dilemmas of Institutionalization*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (London: Sage, 1998), 211-222.

however, the institutional predecessors of some of the trade unions, professional associations, and other types of nonprofit organizations that form an important portion of the post-communist civil society today.

If this fact of continuity in type, if not in substance, of some civil society organizations existing after and before 1989 should be reflected in the analysis of civil societies under state socialism, then the standard definitions of civil society, like the above quoted one by Linz and Stepan, need a modification. An important group of civil society organizations existing today (trade unions, professional associations, welfare organizations, cultural associations, and so on) were not created *ex nihilo* after 1989, but are reconfigurations of institutions that had existed during state socialism. Researchers interested in the strength of civil society *after* 1989, which is one of the essential issues in the study of democratic consolidation of the post-communist countries, should pay full attention to the proto-forms of this civil society that were taking shape *before* 1989.

To do justice to the continuity between civil society structures existing then and now, I propose to expand the boundaries of the social space in state socialist countries that can be regarded as their specific version of civil society by using a less demanding criterion than is offered by the standard definitions of civil society (see A below). The nonstandard looser condition (B) adds to the scope of civil society under communism all state-dominated institutional forms that can be viewed as having an institutional successor in the post-1989 civil society.

Civil society in state socialist systems is thus defined as that sphere of social action and institutions

(A) in which people associate to act in public and to pursue various common goals independently or in open defiance of the dictate of the state (*standard civil society definition*), or

(B) that consists of organizational forms whose institutional successors in the period after 1989 are on standard accounts regarded as elements of civil society in a democratic country (i.e., they meet criterion A in the post-1989 period), but before 1989, these organizational forms were officially recognized by the communist regime, subjected to some (usually rather high) degree of political and ideological control, and often also instrumentalized for perpetuating the party-state's dominance over society (*specific extension for communist-era civil society*).

For the sake of consistency, the social space that meets criterion A, but not B, is further referred to as *independent or narrower civil society*, and the social space that meets criterion B, but not A, is called *broader civil society*, or, since it can

be assumed that this type of social structure is in principle available to serve both pro- and antiregime political goals, it also can be referred to as *neutral civil society*. Because the wider social space composed of these two types of civil society does not yet represent a full-fledged civil society like those existing in developed democracies, it will be called, here, communist-era *proto-civil society*. Empirically, independent civil societies in the communist countries tended to be rather small social precincts clearly separated from broader civil society. However, the more advanced the processes of liberalization and democratization, the bigger the independent civil society will become at the expense of the broader civil society, and the more advanced will be the metamorphosis of proto-civil society into a civil society.

The consequence of adapting this particular definition is a revisionist understanding of civil society in state socialist countries that, unlike the conventional view, does not exclude the formalized and politically instrumentalized communist associational sphere. The communist regimes, so eager to demonstrate that they were the only genuine democracies in the world, took great pains to produce the appearance that not only the membership in the Communist Party, but also participation in certain other organizations (e.g., trade unions) and certain public acts (e.g., attending a May Day rally) gave individuals the chance to share in the exercise of political power. This appearance was, of course, totally false, but the fact that the state socialist regimes believed that it was necessary to nourish it, is significant. It shows that even the emptiest democratic form requires, in order to preserve a modicum of credibility, at least an illusion of civil society. Or to put this differently, since the state socialist regimes could not tolerate a genuinely free system of representation of pluralist social interests, but to suppress that system *tout court* contradicted their democratic rhetoric and overloaded their repressive capacity, they saw themselves forced to maintain a relatively elaborate structure aimed at simulating the representation of social pluralism within the state that was purely formal, but nevertheless existed.⁴ To be sure, this bogus civil society served well the communist regime in its effort to create false illusions about the extent of its actual tolerance for pluralist social interests and the freedoms it granted to citizens. It would be naïve to attribute any actual democratic function to such a loyal and docile structure. Yet, the role of some parts of the official civil society could change dramatically in periods when the state was in crisis or on the verge of collapse. Once the state became too weak to exercise full control over it, this civil society, or important subsets of it, could join the alliance with the antiregime opposition and become a significant force in the process of democratic transition. The importance of this possibility is not

⁴ Among the many accounts of this aspect of communist polities, see, for example, Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” in *Open Letters*, ed. Paul Wilson (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 125-214.

diminished by the no less obvious fact that many, perhaps most, parts of the communist-dominated “civil society” remained loyal to the old regime until the very last moments of its existence.

The definition of the broader civil society before 1989 via the reference to its post-1989 successor institutions might appear as an example of problematic *ex post facto* reasoning, but it can be justified in the context of longer-term history of civil society structures in East-Central Europe. Institutional forms at the core of the broader civil society such as trade unions, sport organizations, or church-related associations predate the period of communist rule in East-Central European countries. Under communism, the existing institutional landscape of civil society was remodeled, drastically reduced in some areas and somehow enhanced in others, and made subservient to the objectives of the state. With the downfall of communism, these institutional structures reemerged as independent social entities again and went through another wave of remodeling. By using their post-1989 forms as point of reference, the part B of the definition assumes the continuity of existence of those more permanent civil society structures under and after communism.

Independent and Broader Civil Society in the Dissident Political Theorizing

It is no coincidence that the dissident political theorists from East-Central Europe by and large excluded the state from their visions of what they called an “independent” or “second” society. For them, the party-dominated state was the principal problem to which civil society was to offer a solution. Attempts to conceptualize civil society as an all-encompassing political community including the state, in the way, for example, Ernest Gellner did in his magisterial book about civil society, *The Conditions of Liberty*,⁵ must have seemed absurd to dissident intellectuals, because the communist state showed no signs of willingness to subject itself to any type of control on the part of society. Discarding the state from their notions of civil society makes it more likely for the dissident political thinkers to equally discard as unworthy of serious attention the extensive area of communist state-dominated civil society structures. If this view clearly predominated among the dissident theoreticians, it can be expected that they also preferred the narrow definition of civil society over the broader one. Nevertheless, the review of some of the most influential dissident notions of civil society offers a more nuanced picture.

⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994).

Positions on civil society and the state naturally varied with the actual political conditions. In countries with particularly repressive and stable post-totalitarian regimes, the dissident conceptions were characterized by deep distrust toward the state *and* the state-dominated civil society structures. Václav Havel's reflections on "political" politics that he eloquently developed in his essay "Politics and Conscience," were highly critical of its alienated, technocratic nature in the East and the West alike.⁶ For Havel, the dehumanizing political and economic mechanisms prevalent in modern industrial societies on both sides of the Iron Curtain offered little hope for a genuinely democratic and truly political politics. He was, therefore, pleading for an "antipolitical" politics, a version of politics that, as it springs forth from authentic individual moral impulses, can become the alternative to the enslaving logic of the political and economic system. Havel's vision of civil society is one that goes very far in rejecting the existing political and economic structures. It is universalistic in that it leaves the possibility of an authentic breakthrough toward unalienated political action open to everyone, but it is elitist in its assessment of the existing social climate in the Czechoslovak society of the time.

This became clear in the debates that were taking place among the leading signatories of the Charter 77 Initiative from 1978 onward. The exchange started when another Charter 77 activist, Václav Benda, voicing his concern that the Charter's grounding in an abstract "moral attitude" was insufficient as a concrete program for action, suggested that the Chartists should fill out this void by promoting and participating in the development of a "parallel polis." Benda called for the creation of various parallel structures, such as a parallel culture, economy, system of education, information network, or political activities that would fulfill those vital social functions the official structures were unable to satisfy. But even if most state-dominated structures were, in his own words, "either inadequate or harmful," he went on to insist that "where possible," the parallel structures should not fail "to use those existing structures, to humanize them."⁷ Benda also stressed that the parallel structures should eventually become autonomous of the Charter, if what was to be built was a parallel polis, not a ghetto.⁸

Havel's most interesting statement on this subject came several years later, in a response he gave to a questionnaire administered to the Central European dissidents in 1986 and 1987 by H. Gordon Skilling, in which he briefly expounded what meaning the notion of "independent society" had for him. His formulations reveal a fundamental ambiguity regarding the possibility of the

⁶ Václav Havel, "Politics and Conscience," in *Open Letters*, ed. Paul Wilson (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 269.

⁷ Václav Benda, "The Parallel 'Polis,'" in *Civic Freedom in Central Europe: Voices from Czechoslovakia*, ed. H. Gordon Skilling and Paul Wilson (London: Macmillan, 1991), 36.

⁸ Benda, "The Parallel 'Polis,'" 40.

expansion of the dissident civil society into broader society. On the one hand, Havel relativized the independence of the independent civil society, pointing toward the omnipresence of the state in state socialist societies. Even the most independent of all dissidents live in state-owned apartments, shop in state-owned stores, and use a state-run health-care system. On the other hand, he firmly stated his belief that the East European dissidents were “genuinely more independent” than their fellow citizens. Even if the differences in independence are ones of degree only, “there are enormous differences between a leading dissident, an ordinary, inconspicuous citizen and a party functionary.”⁹ It is thus legitimate, Havel concluded, to view the Charter as “an enclave of ‘relatively independent’ people, who persistently, gradually and inconspicuously enrich their ‘relatively dependent’ surroundings through the spiritually liberating and morally challenging meaning of their own independence.”¹⁰ In short, Havel—and rightly so, for Czechoslovakia at least—counted on the moral activism of the dissident elite rather than on the “inconspicuous citizen” who, in his characterization, was an extremely unlikely candidate for the role of a regime challenger. The structures of civil society in the broader sense could be perhaps gradually conquered through an “existential conversion,” a path Havel held to be potentially open for everyone, but in the absence of such a revolution of hearts they were regarded as the bastions of the communist power. The sphere of small, hardly visible acts of defiance against the dictate of the regime, and even more so the empty structures of the official public politics, represented to Havel just two different levels of “living in lie” under communism.¹¹ The Czech dissident political theorizing trusted much more the independent civil society, composed of small dissident enclaves, to which all the theorists belonged, than the broader civil society that extended too far into the semiofficial and official sphere.

Poland was the country in East-Central Europe that represented the most extreme opposite to Czechoslovakia. Poland saw the emergence of a strong and successful antiregime mass movement and a critical weakening of the communist state as early as 1980. The political conceptions that provided guidance to the leaders of Solidarity were thus remarkably different from those conceived in Prague. The political program of Polish dissent was maturing during the late 1970s, when the weaknesses of the Gierek regime still remained largely untested but were coming into the full light of day.¹² The strategy of the “new evolutionism,” propounded by Adam Michnik in his famous 1976

⁹ Václav Havel, “Václav Havel,” in *Civic Freedom in Central Europe: Voices from Czechoslovakia*, ed. H. Gordon Skilling and Paul Wilson (London: Macmillan, 1991), 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹ See, for example, Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 136.

¹² Barbara J. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe: Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher-Kings* (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2003), 35-42.

essay,¹³ aimed at fostering and developing a parallel society independent of the state, and at first sight did not look too different from Benda's proposal. The crucial difference was, however, that while the Czech dissidents regarded the expansion of antiregime activism into a society-wide phenomenon as little more than a utopian hope, Michnik foresaw the constitution of a mass and nonelitist parallel social structure. This position left the door open for the possibility that the state-dominated structures of the broader civil society would first become depoliticized, and then perhaps would be repoliticized in the spirit of the democratic opposition.

The articulations of the oppositional perspective on civil society in Hungary—with Poland being the other Soviet satellite where the political conditions in the 1980s were relatively liberal—were situated somewhere in between the Polish and the Czechoslovak cases. György Konrád's antipolitics¹⁴ avoided almost entirely the metaphysical mist and haze in which Havel's thoughts at times disappeared and made what can appear as a fairly similar point, but is in fact quite different: decent survival in a communist society is best possible by making conscious effort to preserve one's moral integrity in everyday life and to lead a fulfilling life where only it is possible, that is, in the intimate circle of members of the family and close friends. Konrád's choice of morally driven antipolitical privatism contrasts sharply with Havel's longing for moral superpolitics, but on the pragmatic level where the Konrádian individualist would soon inevitably clash with the representatives of the system, the difference between the two authors seems less dramatic. Where the difference is more permanent and consequential is in the inclusiveness of the concept of antipolitics. Konrád's belief in the possibility of self-management in all aspects of social life and in the capacity of almost everyone to act antipolitically are the marks of a political conception that downgrades the importance of a sharp frontier between an independent and a broader civil society.

Impossible in Czechoslovakia until very shortly before the November 1989 events, in Hungary the doctrine of parallel societies could be expounded in most elaborate form by an academic employed at an official institution. Elemér Hankiss's study of the "second society"¹⁵ conceptualizes it explicitly as a broad social sphere in which the narrow dissident civil society does not have a significant role at all. Hankiss's description of the Hungarian society remains consistently on the level of sociological macroanalysis, making it impossible to accord a privileged position to particular social structures. In

¹³ Adam Michnik, "A New Evolutionism," in *Letters from the Prison and Other Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 135-148.

¹⁴ György Konrád, *Antipolitics* (New York: Henry Holt, 1987).

¹⁵ Elemér Hankiss, "The 'Second Society,' 1965-1985," in *East European Alternatives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 82-111.

his final formulation of a “quadripartite model” of the Hungarian society, he contrasts the second society not only with the legitimate sphere of the first society, but also with the nonlegitimate sphere of the latter, and, more importantly, with a fully alternative society. The second society is, for Hankiss, not an ideal opposite to the official communist society, but the outcome of the real social processes through which the official society was increasingly being challenged and disintegrated. Among the elements of this second society, he enumerates local communities, a renewing system of interest intermediation, a second public sphere, and also “a certain degree of resocialization from below of the lower spheres of state institutions and mass movements.”¹⁶ This last observation, characteristic of the very late communist systems in which the processes of disintegration were well advanced, provides support to the inclusion of the state-controlled segments into the broader definition of civil society under state socialism.

As this brief review of the positions of various dissident authors in East-Central Europe on civil society has shown, the notions of civil society were becoming the more inclusive and nonelitist (and also the more conscious of the ongoing processes of transformation in the state-controlled civil society during the disintegration of the regime), the weaker the respective communist state was.

Segments of Proto-civil Society in State Socialism

Assessment of the role of civil society in the dramatic events of 1989 calls for an inquiry into the composition of the pre-1989 civil-society structures in East-Central Europe. There obviously could not exist a civil society in any of the possible full meanings which the notion has acquired in standard Western settings. But there was, as argued above, a proto-civil society that could, in favorable conditions, transform into a core of what would one day become full-fledged civil society.

In the communist countries of East-Central Europe, several layers of proto-civil society can be distinguished that differ from each other in their distance from the institution that monopolized political power, the party-state. Social anthropologist Michał Buchowski has used this criterion of the distance from the regime to propose a tripartite typology that recognizes official, unofficial, and politically independent segments of Polish civil society,¹⁷ while another student of pre-1989 Polish civil society, Jan Kubik, identified various “imperfect civil societies” based, too, on the degree of their independence

¹⁶ Ibid., 107.

¹⁷ Michał Buchowski, “The Shifting Meanings of Civil and Civic Society in Poland,” in *Civil Society. Challenging Western Models*, ed. Chris Hann and Elizabeth Dunn (London: Routledge, 1996), 83-87.

from the state.¹⁸ The list of the segments of proto-civil society existing under communism presented in table 1 follows primarily the same logic of decreasing dependence on the regime. Segments 1-5 combined together form what above has been termed the broader civil society, and table 1 also shows the post-1989 successor entities from which it is possible to go back to various organizational types that made up this type of civil society before 1989. The narrower or independent civil society is represented as Segment 6. The last social sphere included in this summary table is that of the informal family and friendly networks that existed at the interface of the proto-civil society and private realm and, as argued below, fulfilled vital supportive functions in relation to the former.

Table 1. Segments of Proto-civil Society in East-Central European Communist Countries and Their Successor Forms in Civil Society after 1989

Proto-civil society before 1989	Definition	Types of entities	Civil society (non-profit sector) after 1989—organizations corresponding to pre-1989 entities
1-5. Broader civil society	Highly ideologized and controlled associations, often with (semi)compulsory membership, vital transmission belts of the Communist Party's power over society	<i>Mass social organizations including: Trade unions, youth organizations, some professional associations</i>	Voluntary associations of various kinds—Trade unions, youth organizations, professional associations
1. Politicized civil society			
2. Apolitical civil society	Officially recognized voluntary organizations with effectively nonpolitical primary objectives (but with some level of politicization at the leadership level), including voluntary organizations surviving from the pre-communist era	<i>Sport organizations, hobby and recreational associations, some professional associations, social-welfare organizations, builders' and tenants' cooperatives, newly legalized nonprofit organizations (Hungary and Poland in 1980s)</i>	Sport organizations hobby and recreational associations, some professional associations, social welfare organizations, mutual-benefit cooperatives, social enterprises, nonprofit organizations (foundations, associations)
3. Traditional civil society			

¹⁸ Jan Kubik, "Between the State and Networks of 'Cousins': The Role of Civil Society and Noncivil Associations in the Democratization of Poland," in *Civil Society before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Nancy Bermeo and Philip Nord (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 181-207.

<p>4. Intellectual civil society based within official sphere</p>	<p>Milieu of cultural and intellectual creativity existing within the state-controlled research, educational, and cultural institutions system</p>	<p><i>Independent-minded circles of academics, research workshops and conferences, research associations and institutes (some), independent minded-circles and networks of artists</i></p>	<p>Academe, think tanks, cultural and intellectual associations, cultural institutions</p>
<p>5. Religious civil society</p>	<p>Officially recognized churches and voluntary organizations primarily related to religion and faith</p>	<p><i>Authorized churches, religious orders, and religious associations, religious charities, cooperatives, hospitals, and other institutions tolerated by the regime</i></p>	<p>Churches, church-related organizations (charities, hospitals, and so on), religious associations</p>
<p>6. Independent civil society</p>	<p>Nonrecognized and outlawed (<i>with rare exceptions, such as Solidarity 1980-1981, and 1989</i>) oppositional political groups, civic initiatives, and independent associations. During regime crisis and liberalization, this segment could expand to include more and more elements of the broader civil society. Antiregime mass protests</p>	<p><i>Oppositional groupings, banned cultural associations, banned religious associations</i></p>	<p>Voluntary associations with political objectives, or cultural and religious voluntary associations</p>
<p><i>Between proto-civil society and private sphere:</i> 7. Family- and friends-based independent networks</p>	<p>Extended family networks and networks of friends important in the second economy and for attainment of informal goals</p>	<p><i>Networks of family members and friends</i></p>	<p><i>Private sphere:</i> Networks of family members and friends</p>

1. The *politicized civil society* consisted of the organizations that are normally included in the sphere of civil society in democratic countries, but that, in the grossly distorted environment of a state socialist society, fulfilled very different functions. Their existence was predicated on the functional imperative for the state socialist system to produce the appearance that it was fully democratic. This sphere typically encompassed the trade unions, an extremely efficient instrument of control by the state of the individuals qua employees, with the usual goals of the union movement, such as genuine representation of the interests of the workers against the employers, largely absent from their agenda. The official sphere also included the openly politicized “social organizations,” such as the unions of friendship with the Soviet Union, membership in which became an especially humiliating experience in countries, such as Hungary or Czechoslovakia, that became victims of direct Soviet aggression. Among other organizations in this group figure the unions of the fighters against fascism and national socialism, as a rule hardliner organizations useful to the regime as a source of legitimacy derived from the prominent contribution of the Communist Party members and sympathizers to the defeat of national socialism, or from socialist women organizations, a political sinecure for a small group of ambitious female members of the party with little or no authentically feminist objectives. Another important group in this category represented the children and youth organizations that served the purpose of indoctrination of the youngest citizens into the communist ideology, and were officially framed as preparatory institutions for the eventual cooptation of the “most politically mature” among their members in the self-proclaimed ruling “avant-garde” of the society, the communist Party.

These organizations were usually much more politicized on the top than on their bottom levels, and, in the periods of liberalization, their more decentralized units could turn into sanctuaries for semi-official and oppositional activities. Some local organizations of the Czechoslovak Socialist Youth Union in the 1980s became a cover for a wide array of cultural, environmental, and sports activities that would otherwise not have been possible. At the same time, however, the top echelons of the Youth Union continued to supply ambitious pragmatic cadres for the ruling bodies of the party.

An important function of these organizations was to strengthen the legitimacy and the stability of the regime by making important social benefits available to their members. Trade unions, for instance, controlled access to recreational facilities, and offered many other useful social services, exclusion from which, for disobedient citizens, represented a serious punishment in a country where alternative providers did not exist.¹⁹ Similarly, the children and

¹⁹ For an excellent analysis of these mechanisms by a first-hand observer (and victim, too), see Milan Šimečka, “Hostage of the State,” in *The Restoration of Order: The Normalization of Czechoslovakia* (London: Verso, 1984), 107-112.

youth organizations had an almost perfect monopoly on free-time activities for children and young adults.

2. Another segment of proto-civil society in the Communist regimes was *apolitical civil society*, consisting of a heterogeneous group of various “mass social organizations,” whose political character and subservience to the Communist Party was declared and enforced with somewhat less emphasis. Sports, hobby, or cultural associations offer a typical example of organizations of this type. This group also included professional organizations that in some cases came closer, because of higher levels of politicization, to the first group, while in other cases they remained mostly apolitical, and in yet other cases could become the sites of some antiregime activities. Those organizations that, like the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union after 1968, were in the eyes of the communist regime guilty of subversive acts, suffered excessive politicization, whereas less conspicuous associations were able to create narrow room for themselves in which activities not approved by the authorities could be pursued. Various branches of the Czechoslovak society for promotion of science and technology, for instance, organized seminars and published gray literature on certain “prohibited topics,” such as the disastrous state of the environment. Professional associations of social scientists were in the course of the 1980s increasingly able to discuss and occasionally even publish views of their members on the deteriorating social and economic situation of the country.²⁰

These organizations were strongly politicized at the top, but unlike the first segment, they were by and large apolitical on the level of everyday activities of the rank and file members. To say this is not to imply, however, that they were not closely observed by the party and its surveillance apparatus.

One of the functionally more specific groups of entities in the apolitical segment of proto-civil society was formed by social-welfare organizations that in most cases had lost their legal autonomy from the state as a result of communist reorganization of the welfare system. This field was populated mostly by older, often pre-communist organizations, but at the same time, it was here that some of the most modern forms of civil society organizations came into existence prior to the regime change of 1989. In Hungary and Poland, Western-style nonprofit organizations were legalized in the second half of the 1980s.²¹

²⁰ Jiří Musil, “Poznámky o české sociologii za komunistického režimu” [Comments on Czech sociology under the communist regime], *Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review* 40, no. 5 (2004): 591.

²¹ For a survey of the field of nonprofit foundations in East-Central Europe, see Mikko Lagerspetz and Marek Skovajsa, “Non-Profit Foundations in Four Countries of Central and Eastern Europe,” *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 2/154 (2006): 187-208.

3. A specific subsegment of the apolitical civil society consisted of the *traditional civil society organizations*, whose history frequently predated the advent of communism by many decades. These entities were often associated with small-town or village settings: voluntary fire brigades, amateur theater groups, choral societies, and associations of hunters, fishermen, or beekeepers. During the first years of the communist dictatorship, these groups were thoroughly reorganized into mass organizations and subordinated to supervisory bodies of the party, but they managed to survive, unlike many other traditional organizations with higher political profile, such as large non-communist sports associations, or organizations deemed potentially dangerous for their high level of independence, such as endowed foundations, that were banned and dissolved. The traditional civil society was to a large degree apolitical, even if deviations in both directions could occur. In the periods of heightened repression on the local level, these organizations could find themselves under severe pressure and serve as instruments of the local communist elite. In the more liberal periods, they represented a link connecting the present with the traditions of the pre-communist era, a function that helped loosen the mental and institutional grip of the communist regime over individuals.²² This sector did not, however, engage in any significant antiregime activities.

4. Another social segment that has to be included in the broader notion of a proto-civil society under communism is composed of the cultural and intellectual institutions such as theaters, museums, libraries, or research institutes. This group that today is regarded as a part of the public nonprofit sector, could be called the *intellectual civil society based within the official sphere*. Due to the specific nature of their activities, these institutions tended toward intellectual autonomy, something that made the guardians of the communist system particularly wary of them and led to frequent interferences on the part of the regime. By producing and presenting intellectual contents that were not fully dictated by the regime, the intellectuals and creative artists, with the exception of those who remained committed to the official ideology, furnished important innovative incentives for the broader civil society. In Czechoslovakia, the actors and other theater professions were, jointly with the students, the most enthusiastic agents of the political change in November 1989.

There is one specific type of institution in the creative field, however, that cannot be included in this group: universities. The degree of political

²² Sandrine Devaux has shown in her study of the development of Czechoslovak youth organizations during communism and post-communism how traditional scout groups could reemerge as local units of the official Pioneer movement thanks to what she, following Erving Goffman, terms the strategies of “secondary adaptation.” See Sandrine Devaux, *Engagements associatifs et postcommunisme: Le cas de la République tchèque* [Associational activities and post-communism: The case of the Czech Republic] (Paris: Belin, 2005), 97.

penetration and ideological surveillance exercised over them was such that it was virtually impossible for a department or even smaller academic unit to engage in significant antiregime intellectual effort²³ (it should be noted that, under communism, universities were transformed from research-and-teaching institutions into ones whose primary objective was instruction, while research was moved to the separate structure of the academies of sciences).

5. A separate and very important category of civil society organizations under communism, traditional, but not apolitical, is that of the churches and religious organizations. *Religious civil society* survived the communist era in spite of the determination of the authorities to root out all “survivals” of the religious practice and belief. The Catholic Church was an extremely important organization in Poland, second to no other in social influence and largely independent of the communist government, and it played a significant role in the confrontation with communism in Hungary and Czechoslovakia as well. The Catholic Church and other churches and religious communities were able, on the limited terrain they regained after the terror of the early 1950s faded away, to sustain various religion-related activities and sometimes to support other nonconformist groups. In Poland, the Communist Party never succeeded in replacing the Catholic cultural hegemony with a secular Marxist one. In other countries of the region, the virulently secularist indoctrination was more efficient, but everywhere religious civil society persisted, providing a powerful remainder of the limits of the ideological power of the party.

6. Except during the totalitarian stage of the history of communism in East-Central Europe, there were also groups that either openly aspired to far-reaching independence from the dictate of the authorities or directly confronted the existing system, or did both things at the same time. This *independent civil society* comes to the fore as that social segment in state socialist regimes that represents the closest approximation to standard Western conceptions of civil society.²⁴ Given the monistic nature of the communist system and its leaders’ deep suspicion of any social forces that could potentially challenge their monopoly of power, the existence of this kind of civil society was precarious and its size limited to very small numbers of individuals. The Solidarity movement that attained a membership of over ten million in the early 1980s is the only exception to this rule, but even Solidarity soon found itself under fierce attack by the Polish communist government, outlawed, and driven

²³ For an excellent study about Czech universities under Normalization (1969-1989), see Pavel Urbášek, *Vysokoškolský vzdělávací systém v letech tzv. normalizace* [Higher education system in the so-called Normalization period] (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 2008).

²⁴ As reconstructed, for example, by Charles Taylor, “Invoking Civil Society,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 204-224.

underground for many years.²⁵ In Czechoslovakia, independent civil society was an interconnected network of small dissident groups, whose combined membership did not reach more than several thousand people. This miniature dissident civil society was the only durable social structure in Czechoslovakia that met the stricter criterion (A) for independent civil society discussed earlier.

Besides these more permanent forms of organization, the notion of independent civil society also encompasses the mostly short-lived outbursts of popular protest in the streets and factories. In periods of great turmoil, such as the Revolution of 1956 in Hungary, the 1968 Reform in Czechoslovakia, and various confrontations between the workers and the regime in Poland, the protest actions became large-scale and difficult to control; in other periods, the regime's repressive policies usually succeeded in nipping any fermenting protests in the bud. This changed toward the end of the communist system, after 1980 in Poland, in the late 1980s in Hungary, and in 1989 in Czechoslovakia and East Germany, when mass mobilizations and protests became endemic and the repressive apparatus proved unable to control them.

7. Finally, the inventory of the various segments of proto-civil society under state socialism would remain incomplete if no mention were made of the very important role of the *family- and friends-based independent networks* both in sustaining other activities not in conformity with the dictate of the regime and in its own right. The inclusion of this layer might appear as problematic, since civil society is usually defined as the social sphere lying outside of both the state and the family. Yet, some authors, especially social anthropologists working on socialism and post-socialism, have argued otherwise. For Michał Buchowski, networks of relatives and friends represented an essential component of civil society in communist Poland.²⁶ Buchowski emphasizes that in the profoundly abnormal situation of a state socialist society, many broader family- or friends-based structures cannot be regarded as merely private. Under the conditions of political oppression and economic shortage, people turned for help to the extended family and friendly networks which functioned as both providers of protection against external political threats and suppliers of otherwise unavailable goods and services. The system of such networks that, in effect, overlapped with one another and formed one global network stretching over the whole society, was an extremely important social sphere. The so-called

²⁵ For an early discussion by a direct participant, see Jadwiga Staniszkis, "Polish Peaceful Revolution: An Anatomy of Polarization," *Journal of Peace Research* 19, no. 2 (1982): 181-195.

²⁶ Buchowski, "The Shifting Meanings," 84-85. The importance of informal networks of connections for open oppositional engagement is stressed also by Kubik, "Between the State and Networks of 'Cousins,'" 187.

second economy was mostly located here. These networks, by their very nature, operated above all in the local settings, where their function was primarily economic, but sometimes they acquired a quasipolitical role. Vital sustaining networks existed in the various subcultures and in the specific intellectual and cultural milieus, in some religious communities, and in the circles of the dissident activists. They represent a mixed blessing. They mobilized vital resources needed to resist the multifarious pressures exerted by the regime upon regular citizens and opposition activists, but they also nourished group egoism and clan thinking.

The next question is, what happened to each of these segments of proto-civil society in the conditions of open crisis of the communist system at the end of the 1980s, and how did they contribute to its final collapse?

Proto-civil Society in the 1989 Transitions

The paths leading to the collapse of the state socialist regimes in East-Central Europe were country-specific and diverged in many important details. Transitions were different in Poland and Hungary, where the disintegration of the state socialist system set out earlier and developed gradually, than in East Germany or Czechoslovakia, where the collapse of the existing regimes was a matter of a couple of weeks. Some authors contrast the pacted transitions that took place in Poland and Hungary to resolutions by capitulation that occurred in East Germany or Czechoslovakia.²⁷ But the most important difference among all these countries seems to be one of time scale rather than of the elements involved, for roundtables and inter-elite agreements took place also in countries where communist regimes “capitulated,” and conversely, those countries that had pacted transitions had these mostly because the communist rulers found themselves unable to reverse the process of decline of their power. The many factors that contributed to the breakdowns of the communist regimes in East-Central Europe range from the altered international environment after Gorbachev’s arrival to power, through growing indebtedness of most communist governments to Western creditors, to mounting dissatisfaction of the people with the material situation and consumption opportunities. Full accounts of the 1989 events must discuss these and various other explanations, and not bypass the difficult issue of the interactions between each and every individual factor. Here, the focus is just on one of the many processes that contributed to the collapse of communism, namely the developments and mobilizations within proto-civil society.

²⁷ See, for example, Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, and John K. Glenn, III, *Framing Democracy. Civil Society and Civic Movements in Eastern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

1. Proto-civil society in East-Central Europe during the 1980s was undergoing a deep and consequential transformation. The organizations of the *politicized civil society* were losing their credibility more than ever before. The dull speeches of the officials of the Union of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship as well as those of the leaders of the Socialist Youth Union, the Union of Socialist Women, or the party leaders themselves were parodied by citizens in private conversations, in illegally circulated recordings, and in the Western-based media. The lower echelons of these organizations, the Youth Union above all, were undergoing a gradual transformation through generational exchange, and their junior officials, less fearful of the consequences of ignoring the orders issued from the top of the hierarchy, here and there provided support to individuals from the semi-legal sphere to organize activities that would not have been tolerated several years before. On the other hand, some of the most powerful social organizations remained the solid bulwarks of the old regime, among them the official trade unions, a fact that can be explained by the close personal intertwinement between the structures of the party and the unions.

2. In the *apolitical civil society*, things seemed to go on as ever before, but even here some trends signaling potential change could be observed. For instance, in the powerful national sports federations, cooperative organizations of producers, or hobby groups, officials experimented with new socialist-entrepreneurial methods, aimed at making profit for their own pockets as well as generating more funds for their organizations. Politics was more and more a mere means in the struggle for resources, material benefits being the end in itself. The new spirit of entrepreneurialism started to corrode the pragmatic loyalty of these and similar organizations to the regime.²⁸

3. The associations of the *traditional civil society* further pursued their mainly apolitical objectives, unperturbed, as it seemed, by the more and more numerous signals that were boding the imminent changes in the state socialist system. Yet, however insulated they were in the safety of the local units of these associations from the dangerous world of public political engagement, their members turned increasingly indifferent and even opposed to the existing regime. In some cases, the nostalgia for the old times became the substitute outlet for the ambition to effectuate change in the present. By growing increasingly alienated from the regime, this sphere, albeit not posing a direct threat to it, subtracted some vital energies from its support base.

4. In the sphere of the *intellectual civil society based within the official sphere*, as defined above, that is, in theaters, galleries, film clubs, municipal

²⁸ Ladislav Holý, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

cultural centers, and similar institutions, the trend in the second half of the 1980s was toward more openness and stronger determination to challenge the official directives in matters of esthetic taste and intellectual creativity. In Czechoslovakia, the growing dissatisfaction among the artists and creative intellectuals found its expression in the petition, “Just a Few Sentences,” circulated in the summer of 1989 and signed by members of both the official and illegal cultural sphere. The artists and intellectuals, especially those who were popular with the general public, were exposed to heavy pressure by the regime to behave in conformity with the official dictate, and many did, because the stakes were high. In the late 1980s, however, they turned in growing numbers against the regime, and the involvement of this social group proved crucial in the first stage of the November 1989 events in Czechoslovakia.

Signs of intellectual fermentation that resulted in initiatives and programs which challenged official policies were increasingly present also in the research-oriented academic sphere. The environmental movement, the only independent social movement whose growth the regime partly tolerated,²⁹ found organizational support and highly motivated adherents at some science institutions. Social scientists, in their turn, took advantage of the more liberal climate of the late 1980s to start a relatively open debate on pressing social issues. Meetings, conferences, and lecture series in the intellectual sphere provided opportunities for interested people to exchange information, network, and consult on possible courses of common action. This training turned out to be vital during the 1989 events and in the first months of post-communism. Many members of the new political elite had gained their formative experiences and contacts in this milieu of half-legal conferences, internal publications, and unofficial policy expertise that formed in the less politically exposed backrooms of official institutions, for which Jiřina Šiklová coined the term “the gray zone.”³⁰

5. Significant antiregime activities in the late stages of communist rule originated in the sphere of the *religious civil society*. The surveillance of religious organizations by the state was tireless, but so was the determination of many believers to secure for themselves free room needed for their worship and faith-based social engagement. The immense social influence of the Catholic Church in Poland proved crucial for the success of the Solidarity

²⁹ Miroslav Vaněk, “Ekologie a ekologické hnutí v posrpnovém Československu” [Environmentalism and environmental movement in Czechoslovakia after August 1968], in *Opozice a odpor proti komunistickému režimu v Československu 1968-1989* [Opposition and resistance to the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, 1968-1989], ed. Petr Blažek et al. (Prague: Dokořán, 2005), 71-86.

³⁰ Jiřina Šiklová, “The ‘Gray Zone’ and the Future of Dissent in Czechoslovakia,” *Social Research* 57, no.2 (1990): 347-363.

movement, and virtually all antiregime initiatives in Poland had some links to Catholic institutions and activities. In East Germany, since the mid-1980s, various Christian communities had actively organized events that, in growing degree, were turning into displays of frustration of the people with the state socialist system. In Hungary and Czechoslovakia, both the Catholic Church and smaller Protestant churches used their personal and material resources to support independent activities. In 1985, the largest ever antiregime mass meeting in Czechoslovakia, counting half a million people, gathered in the Moravian town Velehrad at the occasion of a Catholic holiday. The Catholic hierarchy in Prague became increasingly vocal in its criticism of the official communist policies toward churches and of the abuses of human rights committed by the regime. A petition organized by a small, peasant Christian activist in 1988 was signed by more than 600,000 signatories.³¹ The churches had been for forty years at the center of one of the most violent campaigns waged by the communist regime and, although weakened and partly paralyzed by permanent attacks and infiltrations, they remained a living proof of the Communist Party's failure to achieve complete control over the whole society. This made the presence of churches in state socialist settings an important source of permanent destabilization of the regime and a powerful motivational factor for other oppositional groupings.

6. It might seem that the *independent civil society* was the one sector of civil society before 1989 that experienced the most spectacular expansion. But this was not the case, or at least the actual developments were not so straightforward. The independent segment of civil society suffered most from the heavy-handed attention of the communist regime, and all the dissident activities were closely monitored and suppressed with extraordinary efficiency, unless the regime found itself momentarily in crisis, as it happened for the first time in Poland in 1980 and 1981. The Polish case is also a premium example of an early and very broad mass mobilization in the conditions of an oppressive state socialist regime, where fast mobilization was followed by harsh repression and a subsequent second wave of mobilization, this time slower and less intense, that was met by less and less repression. In short, Poland in the 1980s was the only communist country of all that can be said to have developed a large independent civil society, even if its actual size and degree of independence followed the vicissitudes of the confrontation with the communist power.³² In Czechoslovakia, the yearly numbers of the new signatories of the Charter 77 declaration in the 1980s kept below fifty, with a slight increase at the end

³¹ George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 180-181.

³² Piotr Gliński, "The Self-governing Republic in the Third Republic," *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 1/153 (2006): 55-74.

of the decade.³³ The numbers of participants in the antiregime demonstrations also remained fairly low before the events of November 17, 1989, triggered a critical wave of truly mass-scale protests. In spite of a partial activation of oppositional initiatives from 1987 onward, Czechoslovak civil society displayed very low levels of mobilization until the very end of the communist regime. The situation in East Germany was comparable to Czechoslovakia, while in Hungary the levels of civic activism were higher and mass demonstrations took place earlier, for example on the anniversary of the 1848 revolution in March 1989.

7. The role of the *family- and friends-based independent networks* in the process of disintegration of the communist regime is known thanks to thorough anthropological and oral-historical studies of the informal sphere of life under socialism.³⁴ Their assessment must be ambiguous, for they both fomented a socialist version of Edward C. Banfield's "amoral familism"³⁵ and made vital resources available to the antiregime activists. Also, both contributed to the stability of the regime by supplementing the staggering production output of the official economy or by channeling the energies of citizens into the private realm and subverted the operation of the regime through an abundant production of informal or illegal solutions. The relevance of this sector of the state socialist society for civil society lies in its constituting the material and cultural base on which overtly political antiregime activities could be sustained. The underground structures in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and other countries could survive the concentrated offensive of the regime, because they were connected to this informal society and economy.

The reverse side of this coin is that the informal practices of the socialist period were not only an asset that helped people manage in the conditions of political oppression and economic shortage, but also a liability that made it more difficult for the governments to successfully carry out any reform project, both before and after 1989. Family-centered networks remain ambiguous as a legacy of communism after 1989: they were instrumental in softening the hardships of the transformation for many people, but they are also responsible for high levels of nepotism, corruption, and informalism in those societies.

³³ The numbers were under 30 per year in the mid-1980s, 108 in 1988, and 442 in 1989 (source: Libri Prohibiti Archive, Prague).

³⁴ For example, Holý, *The Little Czech*; Kubik, "Between the State and Networks of 'Cousins'"; Leszek Dzięgiel, *Paradise in a Concrete Cage: Daily Life in Communist Poland: An Ethnologist's View* (Kraków: Arcana, 1998); and Chris Hann, "Not the Horse We Wanted!" *Postsocialism, Neoliberalism, and Eurasia* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2006). For an original Czech study applying Bourdieu's classification of types of capital to the process of disintegration of the state socialist system, attributed to the victory of the family over socialism, see Ivo Možný, *Proč tak snadno? [Why so easily?]* (Prague: SLON, 1999).

³⁵ *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958).

Were There Any Social Movements in East-Central Europe in 1989?

Independent civil society in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s consisted of small “hardcore” groups of dissidents, who, relying on informal networks of solidarity and protective coverage from the West, challenged the authorities’ unfounded claims that in the state socialist countries individual citizens were granted full enjoyment of human and civic rights. Only the premature Poland had extensive experience with the mass-scale forms of independent civil society: mass protest meetings, demonstrations, and strikes. Other societies did not see the arrival of this phenomenon before they entered into the very last stages of their communist history. Mass protests were justly viewed by these regimes as much more dangerous to them than the activities of small dissident groups, because they could uncover their weaknesses and vulnerability. Draconic measures were therefore taken in all countries to prevent mass protests from happening. Also, on the level of the official ideology, the various items in the repertoire of mass protest, such as demonstrations or strikes, were framed as the weapons *par excellence* of the communist movement in the struggle against the old capitalist order. How could the same weapons now be turned against the communists? In what might seem as a paradox, in all the countries of the region the self-proclaimed old masters of mass protest were eventually defeated by mass protest. Such types of collective action, aimed at expressing grievances and opposition against the regime, are commonly called social movements, or to employ a term more often used by the actual actors of those events, “citizen movements.” But were there any social movements at all in East-Central Europe in 1989?

The answer is negative, if social movements are taken to mean what social movement scholars understand them to be. Charles Tilly proposes three criteria that must be met if certain observed mass protest events are to qualify as social movements: (1) they must resemble full-fledged social movements observable elsewhere; (2) they must combine elements of social movements usually present in full-fledged social movements; and (3) such combinations of elements typical of social movements must be widely available to other actors, objectives, and claims.³⁶ A summary look at the mass protest events in the state socialist countries throughout the 1980s, indicates that they satisfied the first and, perhaps in part, the second criterion, but not the third. Demonstrations, for example, were for most of this period available to no one, or just to a small group of the most courageous citizens, later to students, and only in the last stage, for a very short time, when communism was already giving way to post-communism, to everyone. Many other elements of standard social movement repertoires did not become *widely* available to most participants in public politics long after the collapse of communism.

³⁶ Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768-2004* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), 78.

This aside about social movements in late communist societies reasserts the need to approach the realities of civil society in this societal type from a different angle than is customary in the research of civil societies in Western democracies. There existed no full-fledged civil society and no full-fledged social movements anywhere in the communist world. The germs of the two, however, were present in manifold social settings, sometimes in easily recognizable forms, in other cases quite dissimilar from their analogues in Western democratic societies. To do justice to all the elements, out of which the post-communist civil societies are reconstituting themselves, this theoretical and also methodological point should not be ignored. The central question of the closing section is whether civil society in the broader sense had recognizable effects on the course of the process of democratization which are distinct from the effects of the independent civil society.

The Two Types of Civil Society and Successful Democratization

Can the strength or weakness of the broader civil society be used for gauging the prospects for democratic breakthrough before the actual political change takes place? As the events in East-Central Europe, especially in Poland in the early 1980s, show, even the most spectacular developments within proto-civil society are not by themselves a sufficient condition for successful transition to democracy. The activation of civil society, whether in the narrower or broader sense, is but one among several factors contributing to the collapse of the old regime, and one whose effects it is impossible to analytically isolate from those of the other factors, both domestic and external. One has to conclude, thus, that the study of existing elements of proto-civil society before the systemic change is unable to provide a reliable measure of the proximity of the regime's fall.

More optimism is allowed regarding how the shape of proto-civil society before the systemic change influences the prospects for successful democratic consolidation. The choice to define the communist-era broader civil society through post-1989 institutional successors makes it possible to study the continuity in civil society development bridging 1989. Unless total collapse of the social structures of the old society occurred simultaneously with the collapse of the old regime, the preserved infrastructure of proto-civil society is likely to improve the chances for dynamic development of the new civil society after 1989. If, following Linz and Stepan, civil society is viewed as one of the five crucial arenas in which the consolidation of democracy takes place,³⁷ the strength of broader civil society under communism will also help to increase the likelihood of the success of democratic consolidation.

This type of reasoning might seem to be dangerously close to the circular error of explaining the effects from the causes that had been originally derived

³⁷ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, 7-8.

from those effects. Yet, the reversed temporality applied in the definition of broader civil society serves only to identify where, within the limits of the pre-1989 official society, to look for the predecessors of presently existing civil society organizations, and it is an empirical question whether one will find in a given communist society those predecessors in sufficient numbers and endowed with sufficient strength.

One significant benefit that can be drawn from the dual way of approaching the proto-civil societies under communism (i.e., from distinguishing broader and independent civil society) is that it enables more nuanced understanding of the effects of either civil society type on the processes of political change. The case of countries such as Czechoslovakia or East Germany shows that transition to democracy could occur in situations where independent civil society had no continued strong presence. The case of Poland in 1980-1981, by contrast, indicates that the existence of a strong independent society provides no guarantee for a rapid overthrow of the regime. Poland had a large and active independent civil society for ten years, Czechoslovakia for several days. Both countries achieved their transition toward democracy roughly at the same time. Thus, it seems that, contrary to common-sense assumptions about democratization in East-Central Europe, independent civil society is not a number one condition of the regime's collapse. What is more, it even might not be the decisive factor of the success of post-1989 development of a democratic civil society. Countries with relatively strong civil societies today, such as all the East-Central European ones (in comparison to, for example, the Central Asian post-Soviet republics), had relatively well-developed broader civil societies before 1989, whereas only Poland, and perhaps Hungary, also had a really significant and durable independent civil society. The partial generalization for East-Central European countries seems to indicate that the structures of broader civil society are more fundamental for the prospect of successful post-1989 civil society development than those of independent civil society.

One tentative step further in the direction of a more encompassing comparison within post-communist countries that is presented in table 2 seems to confirm this surprising conclusion. In the Soviet Republics excluding the Baltic States, both the independent and broader civil societies were weaker than in East-Central Europe. There exists no case of a communist country in which a strong independent civil society would combine with a weak broader civil society, with the sole partial exception of Russia in the period of liberalization under Gorbachev. On the other hand, the case of Kazakhstan can be selected as typical of the many other Soviet republics with almost nonexistent independent civil society and rather weak broader civil society. If the respective strengths of civil societies after 1989 are compared across the region and related to the two variables for civil society types before 1989, it is plausible to argue that it is the broader, not the independent, civil society that turns out to be the necessary condition of successful post-1989 civil society development. It is, however,

not a sufficient condition, as many other political and economic factors have to intervene, including undoubtedly the continuing tradition of independent civil society from before 1989.

Table 2. Independent vs. Broader Civil Society before 1989 and Civil Society after 1989

		Broader civil society	
		strong	weak
Independent civil society	strong	<i>Poland</i> <i>Hungary</i>	<i>Russia (under Gorbachev)</i>
	weak	<i>Czechoslovakia</i> <i>East Germany</i>	<i>Russia (before Gorbachev)</i> <i>Kazakhstan</i>
Civil society after 1989		strong	weak

How can the successes of some countries and the failures of others in building viable civil societies after 1989 be explained in the light of the above findings? The successful ones typically had relatively strong associational sectors before the arrival of the Communist Party to power. This is the case of all four Visegrád countries, but much less so of the former Soviet republics, with the exception of the Baltic States. Pre-communist civil societies were subdued and dismantled by the communist party-state, but the institutional inertias they once had set in motion continued to provide models for possible courses of action that received either token recognition on the part of the regime and were enacted in the rituals of communist public politics, or were preserved in latent forms in the surviving organizational structures. In countries that had had less developed civil societies before communist takeovers, such as Russia and most other post-Soviet republics, both the independent and broader civil societies were also much weaker under communism. In consequence, they typically encountered major difficulties in their efforts to build standard democratic civil societies afterward.

Countries that had entered the communist period of their history with weak civil societies had few chances to strengthen them during communism, although some saw major activations in the area of mass protests toward the end of their undemocratic regime (Romania, 1989, and Ukraine, 2004). These short-term mobilizations could not, however, compensate for the absence of long-term traditions of broad civil society development, as was confirmed by the subsequent problems the same countries encountered with democracy building. No country that had lacked a strong civil society in the broad sense before it succumbed to communism emerged with a strong civil society from the communist episode. Even those countries that had relatively well-developed civil societies before communism (Central European and Baltic

States and some former Yugoslav republics) found themselves endowed with much weaker civil societies at the end of communist rule. Their competitive advantage was, however, to have the blueprints of civil society still present in their institutional memory, and this was a legacy on which they could base their so far successful efforts to reconstruct their democracies.

To conclude, two remarks can be made about the new perspectives opened by the study of broader civil society structures in the transition from communism to post-communism. First, it calls for a critical reappraisal of the huge bulk of literature about civil society building in post-communist countries that, as a rule, starts from the unquestioned assumption that, since independent civil societies in communist states were very weak or inexistent, there are no or at best extremely thin domestic social structures to which the newly constructed civil society should be connected.³⁸ Second, the positive role of broader civil society in the democratization process should not be underestimated. The existence of dissident enclaves is undoubtedly a hugely important political fact and a glorious testimony to how ineradicable the striving for pluralism and freedom in an authoritarian society is. Yet, democratization cannot occur unless the dissident groups or other social forces figure out how to mobilize the entire society and come forward with political demands that resonate with the majority of the population. Such wider resonances are possible, when (1) the regime shows enough signs of weakness, and (2) there are structures able to transmit and multiply the signals emitted from the mobilizing core groups and to serve as the vehicles of mobilization. Once and if they extricate themselves from the iron grip of the party-state, the structures of the broader civil society can become the most efficient transmitters and multipliers³⁹ of impulses from those who call for a revolt against the existing system. They will function as vehicles of social mobilization if the regime's oppression is not excessive.

If this interpretation holds out vis-à-vis the facts, it can be further argued that the conceptions of civil society proposed by the dissident political theorists from East-Central Europe in the 1970s and the 1980s were well-tailored to the political realities of the time, as long as they avoided to draw the elitist conclusion that civil society equaled the tiny social enclave of the dissident groups.

³⁸ An early criticism of this view was formulated by Chris M. Hann, "Civil Society at the Grassroots: A Reactionary View," in *Democracy and Civil Society in Eastern Europe*, ed. P.G. Lewis (London: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 152-165.

³⁹ For an original formulation of the idea of civil society as a neutral system of social multipliers, see Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics* 49 (1997): 401-429.

