Civil society and local governance in post-communist settings: theoretical perspectives and empirical challenges

Egle Vaidelyte, Egle Butkeviciene

Kaunas University of Technology, Kaunas, Lithuania

The paper is based on the two-fold approach: 1) general approach to the civil society and government partnership in local democracy; 2) particular approach examining how above mentioned general approach works in post-communist settings.

In recent years the role of civil society in local governance has become a popular topic in many academic discussions. In last decades the transfer from traditional public administration to a new public management and eventually new public governance models has emphasized the rebirth of civil society all over the world. However, the question that remains without explicit answer yet, is who should initiate the partnership: civil society or government? Some theorists (Denhardt/Denhardt 2003, Nalbandian 1999, Pateman 1970) argue that government could play an active role in encouraging citizen involvement in decision making. Putnam (2000) argues that democratic tradition is dependent on the existence of civically engaged citizens, active in governmental units. A lack of citizen participation in modern governance reduces the capacity of local democracy to be representative and responsive. Meanwhile, Denhardt and Denhardt (2003) emphasize that “citizens would do what they are supposed to do in a democracy – they would run government”.

The second question eventually discussed in the paper is how does the western practise work in post-communist settings? Together with political and social changes, democracy and civil society ideas are returning back to the Lithuanian society. However it is not only about their “return”, but also about their “introduction”, since to some extent civic concepts are new in social life and social discourse and mentality of Lithuania, as well of other post-communist countries. It is widely debated, that „the surprise of post-communist transition”, is that western economic, political and social theories and practices are not always valid in post-communist context (Outhwaite/Ray 2005). According empirical data, it might be assumed that Lithuania even after 20 years of transitions still feels the legacies of non-democratic period – the lack of civil initiative and specific approach towards civil society. In 2008 Lithuania has passed a new Law on Local Governance that includes several chapters describing the role and opportunities for citizen participations. However, as empirical data indicate the civic engagement is not high as citizens prefer government initiative and government expect citizen involvement.

The paper is based on the results of representative quantitative research “Local democracy 2009”. Lithuania is divided in 60 municipality regions. The study represents the results of 60 structured interviews with the directors of each municipality. Some quantitative illustrative data from the interviews are included as well. The results of interviews include the viewpoint of local authorities towards opportunities and challenges of the current situation of local governance and civil society partnership. The empirical data interpretation attempts to provide an answer the following questions: who is responsible for the partnership? How are public administrators affected by or do they affect civil society? What are the determinants of active public participation in local governance and how does it work in post-communist settings.

References:


