

“Why do I have to trust you?” The perspective from civil society on active citizenship in post–communist Albania

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Abstract

Civil society (CS) is the main medium in which active citizenship can flourish and have an impact on good governance and democracy. The communist past has played a major role in CS underdevelopment across Eastern European countries but research primarily targeting the elites has explained little of how citizenry has developed and mapped little of the cross-country variation. This paper attempts to increase understanding, looking at the case of Albania, where low levels of active citizenships are documented¹, as the main indicator of this underdevelopment. Data from in-depth interviews with key informants explain that it results from a combination of historical factors with current determinants such as the low perceived level of impact, the transparency of CS actors and the political influence believed to often dictate their agendas. These and additional explorations of gender and age differences lead to suggested new strategies to boost active citizenship in the country.

KEY WORDS:

citizenship, activism, civil society, post-communist societies

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1 See Civil Society Index for Albania (IDM, 2010)

Introduction

Works exploring issues of civil society in Albania have not been many, although more than two decades have passed since the country (like other countries of Eastern Europe) left behind long decades of communism. The first light on the issue was shed by Sampson (1996) highlighting the role of western donors in shaping the reality of “civil society”. In his opinion, the “interests” of various actors, “contexts” in which they operate and the “resources” they have at their disposal are important factors in the effort to engage civil society. He notes, however, that the western view of transition, in relation to the eastern countries, generally assumes a conversion to western models and ways of being; meaning, in the case of civil society, a “system export”.

Even less attention has been paid to active citizenship, its dimensions and variations, while internationally, the interest in citizens activism and the role of civil society have been growing continuously, not least because of the importance they signal for a democratic society. Albania as a new democracy has to join other democratic societies with an emphasis on the importance of ‘citizen participation’ for good governance; citizens are expected to be more involved in the policy process and to more actively participate in governing their own communities and societies (Matsuda 2009).

The communist past is often claimed to have played a major role in the underdevelopment of civil society, and in an active citizenry in the ex-communist countries of the Eastern Europe. Research has often focused on the region, but although the countries share many similarities, there is continuous movement in each, and much diversity to be explored (Hann and Dann 1996; Vasiljevic 2014). Looking at them through western eyes, the focus has been primarily on the elite (such as writers, dissidents etc.) of these countries providing little information about the way citizenry developed and is challenged (Hann and Dann 1996; Lewis 2001).

Chiodi (2007) provides one of the few empirical analyses on the nature of post-communist civil society in Albania, focusing mainly on the problem of

control, that of technocracy and the heuristic value of western categories. She finds that, even though the Albanian elite appreciated the consistent foreign involvement in its social development, the political elite had a harder time in coming to terms with civil society organisations. Chiodi argues that one of the reasons Albanian citizens criticized local NGOs and civil society organisations in general was the overall perception that NGOs have an impact on, and benefit their own representatives rather than the society, and this was confirmed by her empirical study.

Chiodi's findings are also supported by the BTI transformation index (2012; 2014) according to which, before the subject of civil society became an issue of public debate, the idea was introduced to Albania through Western donor aid policies, the goal of which was to stimulate civic participation and introduce the populace to democratic values and behaviour. Foreign assistance has largely contributed to fostering local NGOs and enriching the public sphere, although local NGOs were not influential in the public sphere and were thus less important. Emphasising the evolution of the NGOs and their roles in civil society in Albania the report states that at some point NGO employees and organisations themselves stopped blindly imitating the western models and started acting as cultural mediators for foreign donors and organisations, trying to describe to them the features of the local context. Even nowadays Albanian civil society is viewed as a cluster of donor-driven NGOs, however, rather than a collection of genuinely local interest groups and grassroots movements in touch with local priorities. Many civil society leaders are somewhat connected to politics, adding to the lack of public's trust in them (BTI 2014). These are among the factors claimed to contribute to the low levels of activism and impact of both citizens and CS in Albania (IDM 2010).

This paper is an attempt to deepen the understanding of the particularities of active citizenship and citizen participation in Albania through civil society organisations, as an ex-communist country in transition. It explores the background to the low levels of citizen participation, looking at historical, cultural and social determinants. Based on information provided through in-depth interviews with key informants in the Albanian civil society sector, the paper looks at the current traits of active civic engagement through civil society organisations in the country, with particular focus on gender and age diversity. Exploring the determinants believed to be shaping

the current rates of citizen activism, the paper also outlines strategies proposed by participants in the research to overcome existing obstacles to a more active and participatory citizenship in Albania.

A theoretical framework

Citizens are expected to play an active role in the policy process and collaborate with other actors such as governments and the private sector, so that their preferences can be reflected in policy determination (Matsuda 2009). Traditionally, the concept of governance used to be associated with government, whereas today this is no longer the case. Current definitions of governance seem to at least agree on the idea that nowadays governance includes “reference to processes and actors outside the narrow realm of government” (Kjær 2004: 1). The emphasis on governance suggests that government should not be regarded as the only actor in charge of tackling social problems. On the contrary, a variety of actors should be considered when analysing who is to ‘govern’ society.

Achieving an active and meaningful citizenship can be a challenge for many democratic societies, including those with developed or long-established democratic traditions, and even more so for those with a fragile democracy. A number of Central and Eastern European countries currently have an arguably fragile participatory citizenship, which can hinder the overall process of democratization (Hirt 2012). It has been claimed that their dictatorial past has frozen the capacity for active citizenship and civil society for 40 years (Hann and Dann 1996) and this is having repercussions in the aftermath of the fall of communism. In Albania, for instance, the last two decades have witnessed a blossoming of civil society in comparison to the communist past; nonetheless CS in Albania still lags behind in comparison not only to that of developed democracies but also to that of other developing countries in the region, with a similar history. So, too, does the level of active citizenship, as documented in the Civil Society Index in Albania 2010 (IDM 2010).

Several theories have developed on the notion of citizenship, which differ primarily in the perspective they take on the relationship between rights and responsibilities of the citizen. They can be divided into two main groups: liberal individualistic and republican or communitarian approaches. Habermas (1994: 25-26) makes a clear distinction between liberal individualistic approaches and republican/communitarian approaches. The former stem from the liberal Lockean view of natural law, stress the rights of citizens and regard the protection of these rights as the primary function of the state. Republican/communitarian approaches have developed in line with the philosophical tradition of Aristotle; emphasising citizens' duties and their belonging to a community: the approaches call for an involved citizenry (Kivisto 2008).

The ongoing attempt to conceptualise citizenship has been recently challenged by contemporary social changes. Globalisation and the facilitated transnational movement of people have changed the relationship between the state and citizens. This has resulted, among other things, in an increase of the number of individuals with dual or multiple citizenships, which also signals the coming of "a new era in which the nation-state's monopoly on defining citizenship is being challenged" (Kivisto 2008: 543). Such changes have also been accelerated by recent technological innovations.

Globalisation, moreover, has changed the scope of social problems and the methods used to deal with them, stimulating the establishment of supra-national organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union. As a result the roles of the state in defining citizenship have changed, and as van Steenberg (1994) puts it an "earth citizen" is emerging. The concept of citizenship is being also challenged by the current emphasis on transnationalism and multiculturalism² where a dilemma is to what extent group differences should be acknowledged and how unity and diversity should be balanced in multicultural societies (see for example Kymlicka 1995; Kymlicka and Norman 1995).

In addition to these contemporary challenges to citizenship, the recent

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2 Although traditional approaches to defining citizenship have focused on the rights of an individual, the diversity of contemporary societies and group rights, especially those for minorities, are increasingly recognised as significant (Matsuda 2009). Rights often referred to as cultural rights have been newly added to Marshall's (1950) types of rights (Delanty 2005).

stress on governance and citizen participation has revitalised the traditional debate between liberal individualism and republicanism/communitarianism over the relationship between the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Citizens are expected to be active participants in the community as well as in the polity, contributing to the common welfare, to the economy's wealth production and, most significantly, sharing in the rights and responsibilities of the polity.

There have been, in fact, an increasing number of studies that refer, explicitly or implicitly, to the notion of active citizenship and insist on the promotion of citizen participation (Schachter 1995; Alford 2002). Turning to educational policy in affluent democracies, moreover, one finds active citizenship declared more often today than previously. The era of governance requires active citizenship; citizens are now expected to be active in governing globalised and multicultural society.

The notion of citizenship is often described as a legal status or relationship between the individual and the state (Lister 2003). According to Lawson (2001: 177), citizenship consists of "the notion of participation in public life, the idea that a citizen is one who both governs and is governed, a sense of identity, an acceptance of societal values, and rights and responsibilities". Feminist critiques of the concept of citizenship (as both a social and legal status) have argued that it is distinctly male and predicated on an idealist notion of the white, European, middle class, able bodied man (Sawer 2005).

Finally, but central to our approach, another view conceptualises citizenship as participation in civil society (Delanty 2005). This view underlines the relationship between citizenship and participation in the political community, which is argued starts early in life. As Delanty (2005) explains, citizenship is an "active agency and a social actor" shaped by relationships with others. Civil society thus occupies a particular space as the realm of opportunity for such a role to be played out, but also for citizenship to be learned. It is from this viewpoint that this paper looks at Albanian civil society and its importance for a society that fosters active citizenship and democracy.

Citizenship as participation – The role of civil society (CS) in Albania

The section on the theoretical framework explained the conceptual framework and the stand from which this paper and its findings can be read (without intending to be exhaustive of the theoretical debate in the realm of either citizenship issues or civil society) this section is a tailored background of Albania. It aims to set the context for civil society development and citizen engagement in the targeted country.

The history of civil society in Albania is brief. Albania was not a free country until 1944, after which the totalitarian rule which dominated the country for most of the second half of the 20th century acted not only as a huge obstacle to citizen empowerment and participation, but also as an inhibitor to the development of a culture of participatory citizenship in the country. As in many other communist countries, civil society organisations and action were repressed by the regime, with a low level of public awareness of citizen rights (Zaharchenko and Gilbreath Holdar 2010).

As argued by Wedel (1994), under communism the nations of Eastern Europe did not have a 'civil society'. Lack of freedom was considered the main obstacle to a civil society. In Albania, however, the communist regime was one of the longest and most severe; and particularly harsh in the sphere of social control. A few organisations which were active among Albanians in the diaspora had almost no impact on the life of those in the country. In such a context, there was little space for individual or non-governmental voluntary activities.

The phenomenon of voluntary association, free of control and direction from the government, was absent in Albania for many years, however, voluntarism was a well-known term and activity among Albanians, albeit with a completely different meaning and context. People were involved continually in the so-called 'volunteering initiatives' dedicated to building the country and the "new socialist man" but they were not a result of people's free will. On the contrary, people were very often forced into and burdened with the "volunteer work" which continues to echo negativity to the generations of the post-communist era.

The concept of civil society in western terms as *the arena – outside of the family, the state, and the market – which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations and institutions to advance shared interests*, has historically been absent in Albania. Terms such as ‘civil society’, ‘non-governmental organisations’, ‘not for profit organisations’ and other related concepts have been added to the Albanian discourse only recently, after the fall of communism. Before this, the dimensions that citizenship and activism could take were related to and defined only by the state party. Similarly, other terms such as ‘charity sector’, ‘voluntary sector’, ‘community sector’ or ‘third sector’, which in some countries (e.g. in the UK) gained more ideological and conceptual traction, remained virtually unknown to Albanians until the 1990s (Jochum, Pratten and Wilding 2005). In fact, defining civil society and other concepts related to it, including active and participatory citizenship, have proved to be difficult tasks, not only in countries like Albania where such concepts are new, but also, of course, in countries with a recognised tradition of the third sector.

In the years following the fall of communism, civil society organisations were seen as the route towards revitalising active citizenship in Albania, however, the developments that followed showed that this was not always the case. The work of Sampson on civil society in Albania sheds light on the role of western donors in shaping the reality of “civil society” in the first years of transition. In his review of the developments of the time, Sampson notes that the western view of transition, in relation to eastern countries, generally implied conversion to western models and ways of being, which in the case of civil society was a “system’s export”. This statement is supported by the BTI transformation index (2012; 2014) according to which before the subject of civil society became an issue of public debate, the idea was introduced to Albania through western donor aid policies, the goal of which was to stimulate civic participation and introduce the populace to democratic values and behaviour.

The emergence of hundreds of NGOs and civil society groups after the 1990s in Albania is considered a major achievement on the road to democracy (HDCP 2009). The role played by civil society in the country’s political, social and economic processes has been unique and of vital importance. Even the discrepancy found between the appreciation of

the Albanian elite for consistent foreign involvement in Albanian social development, and the harder times the political elite had in coming to terms with CS organisations could be seen as a sign of pluralisation (Chiodi 2007).

Decades after the systemic change, however, local NGOs have not become influential in the public sphere as the western hegemony in Albania was present through other routes. Even now Albanian civil society is viewed as a cluster of donor-driven NGOs, rather than a collection of genuinely local interest groups and grassroots movements in touch with local priorities. Many civil society leaders are connected somewhat to politics, adding to the lack of public trust in them (BTI 2014).

The NGO Sustainability Index (SI) published annually over the last decade by USAID, measuring the progress of the NGO sector, indicates that civil society in Albania is currently far from the advanced stage of civil society in developed democracies. The NGO sector is in fact a shrinking horizon (2010). The civil society sector in Albania has been diminishing in terms of size, type, and geographical coverage of activities. NGOs in all fields of activities, working at all levels, have experienced bad times due to a lack of funding. Many have become inactive, while the role of those that remain is very limited. To illustrate we refer to the most recent available data reported by Partners Albania for 2009, where of more than 800 NGOs registered in Albania only around 50% were active (HDPC 2009).

Think tanks are also experiencing difficult times. They operate in a policy environment that is perhaps more competitive than that in which many of them started. As in other Eastern European countries during the first decade of transition, think tanks played an advisory role to the reformer agencies, mostly in the framework of foreign assistance (Krastev 2001), however, in recent years, think tanks have reduced their role in offering their expertise on issues related to public institutions. The reasons for this may be complex and need to be explored specifically. The research undertaken by think tanks has also been reduced due to a lack of funding.

The Society Index indicates a clear NGO stagnation in each assessed dimension over the recent years. A lack of financial resources, high donor dependence, a substantial decrease in the quantity and impact

of advocacy activities towards governmental policies, a decrease in membership in associations and networks and a decline in NGO services to citizens explain this stagnation. The stagnation of the NGO sector identified in much of the existing literature on Albanian civil society, combined with the findings of the Civil Society Index in Albania (IDM 2010), which show a low level of citizen participation, are further explored in this paper.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed to explore from the CS actor perspective the barriers and opportunities for civic engagement through civil society organisations in Albania. In addition to a review of the most relevant reports, documents, and literature on civil society, civil sector and active citizenship, primary data was gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants. Key informants were identified among representatives of CSOs that use citizen participation and which interact with active citizens, who would therefore be best informed about their profiles, interests and needs. Accordingly, the findings of the study are derived primarily from in-depth interviews with representatives of unions, membership-based NGOs, and other non-governmental organisations in the country. A total of 32 key informants were purposefully selected on the basis of their expertise and activism in the area of CS and voluntarism in Albania. Eighteen were women and fourteen were men, with an experience in this field ranging from 3 to 15 years.

The study is limited in terms of its scope and targets:

- *Limitations in scope.* The study doesn't cover religious groups, media, and political parties which, according to certain international definitions (e.g. CIVICUS definition³), are also part of civil society. The analysis in this study refers mainly to the civil society actors such as NGOs, political organisations (but not political parties) and unions.

3 CIVICUS defines Civil Society as "the arena – outside of the family, the state, and the market – which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations and institutions to advance shared interests".

- *The participants were only active civil society actors.* A different perception of 'active citizenship' might be expected from active and successful individuals compared to less active individuals. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study it was decided to focus on experienced civil society actors as the interviewees, given their longer and richer practice in working with active citizens.

Data Analysis and Findings

Data collected via in-depth interviews with key informants was transcribed, coded and then analysed according to these domains of interest: traits of active citizenship in Albania, influencing factors, and barriers and opportunities towards promoting active citizenship. The findings derived from the interviews were contextualised in the framework of the literature review and are presented in the following sections of the paper, organised under the topics the paper aims to address.

Understanding the traits of active citizenship in Albania

It was a common perception of the participants in this study that citizen participation and activism in Albania, regardless of the developments following the fall of communism, have persistently been very low. With very few exceptions, such as the citizen's engagement in pressuring the government in 2013 to say 'no' to chemical weapons demolition in the country⁴, few positive experiences were hardly and pointed out. This lack of memory of the successful episodes is the result not only of their rarity but also because many small scale protests go unreported, or are not linked to results (Chiodi 2007).

4 In November 2013, after long protests by civil society and citizens, the Albanian government, rejected a request by Washington for it to host the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. See: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/15/albania-rejects-request-disposal-syrian-chemical-weapons>

As well as being in line with the findings of the Civil Society Index in Albania, our data provides sound explanations for several of the trends established in quantitative terms. According to several of the participants sharing their views about the low levels of engagement of citizens in the activities of civil society organisations, low participation is primarily due to the immense distance of the CSOs from citizens and their groups of interest.

"It is very rarely that you'll find CSOs that have their roots among citizens, groups of interest and that enjoy their trust and support. Grassroots organisations are either inexistent or very weak" (Male, CSO representative).

This detachment from the communities and citizens overlaps with several other factors which are believed to keep citizens away from CSOs and activism in general. Our findings show that these underlining factors could be categorised under two main topics: awareness and efficiency. Apparently, Albanian citizens lack knowledge, information and awareness of the ways in which they may become engaged, actively participate in governance and decision-making, and have an important agency as stakeholders on different issues.

"Most citizens are not aware of the power they have. And even if they do, they have no information or access to the channels where such power could be directed to strengthen their voice. The not-so-distant past of looking upon the state and passively expecting it to resolve any issues, making it seem "mighty", is still common among Albanian citizens" (Female, CSO representative).

Their low interest and involvement in the civil society sector is believed to be partly because the sector is perceived as not very efficient or transparent. Such perceptions are based either on people's personal, unsuccessful experiences in the cases where they did get involved or due to a lack of information on the agenda, activities and successes of civil society in Albania at large.

"The extensive number of NGOs in these recent years and their vague success has resulted in an overall view of the CSO-s as ineffective, narrow-minded and untrustworthy. It is as simple as

this: why do I have to trust you? And evidence for that answer is missing" (Male, CSO representative).

A crucial factor is described as the way the relationship between civil society and the political arena is negatively perceived by citizens. Except for the cases in which direct interests are questioned or in which serious and direct threats are anticipated, Albanian citizens would not 'risk' affiliating themselves with any movement or organisation that would involve opposition towards governments. This is mainly due to fears inherited from the past, but according to one of the interviewees also from how things have developed in recent years.

"There is evidence to suggest that these fears are substantiated even nowadays. Citizens who have affiliated themselves with oppositional movements or organisations have risked their working place, or have suffered discrimination as a result of their political views and actions" (Female, CSO representative).

Nonetheless, the participants noted several specific traits of those who do engage actively. Exploring the motivation for active citizenship, it appeared easier for the participant to address it and form a comparative perspective between engagement through NGOs dealing with socio-economic development issues and other types of organisations. First, involving citizens can be an easily achieved goal for religious groups and large political parties. In the former, citizen activism, although limited in quantity, can be very strong, with belief often being the main driving reason. In political parties, activism was believed to be motivated primarily by benefits once the party gains power. Such benefits might include, for example, employment, and schooling or higher/continuous education for the activists or their children. This confirms a BTI (2014) report which claimed that in Albania civil society is still viewed as a cluster of donor-driven NGOs, rather than a collection of genuinely local interest groups and grassroots movements in touch with local priorities. Many civil society leaders are somewhat connected to politics, adding to the lack of public trust.

"You can easily see that, with the exception of the chemical weapons protests, none of the protests of civil society has ever

been comparable to political parties' rallies which fill main squares" (Male, CSO representative).

When it comes to NGOs, however, it is claimed that it can be more effective to organise and stimulate the activism of citizens on the basis of their feelings of belonging. Small groups based on common interest, such as professional groups for instance, have proven to be more active and more efficient in their initiatives. According to the participants, experience shows that when issues such as the environment, electricity, or clean water are targeted by a certain movement, they can be considered too broad or general to achieve any tangible results and therefore rarely act as a strong incentive for active citizens, in spite of the fact that they maybe massively important problems. For the several of the interviewees, one explanation for this variation was to be found within the second category of factors – efficiency. Lack of efficiency in the tradition of CSOs activism is a responsible factor.

"Citizen initiatives around such issues have often proven to be unsuccessful or to require a long time for the results to show. Citizens fail to see direct and immediate results for many years, and fewer and fewer people mobilise to join similar initiatives in the future when called upon" (Male, CSO representative).

Another important determinant is the "appeal" of the initiative to donors. The initiatives that manage to have an impact or last long enough to bring about change are expected to be supported by donors. The donor driven agendas of many NGOs do lead to weakened agency and links with ordinary citizens.

"I was very fond of a project on voluntarism among high school students on the issue of environment protection. It needed little seed money as it would continue on volunteer terms as peer-to-peer education on activism but it did not manage to get funds. It was not under the areas of priority for donors, although environment issues and youth activism are in fact high priority issues in the national context" (Female, CSO representative).

The “profile” of the Albanian active citizen

Although generally speaking active citizenship was considered very low, interviewees could see several variations based on gender, age, ethnicity and geography which moderate the enabling or disabling environmental factors for activism in Albania. According to their experiences, greater participation and activism is usually found at the local level, rather than at the central/national level. When issues concerned the immediate community, and therefore directly affected the quality of life of families and their children, women were perceived to have considerable agency compared to men, however, whenever such issues are taken further to the national or central level, women were perceived as being 'lost' along the way.

“Citizens need to see the direct impact of their actions and be able to identify and understand their risks and benefits. Thus it may happen more often that we see citizens getting together to fix an issue over an elevator rather than see them organised around issues of social insurance and pensions in the country”
(Male, CSO representative).

The reasons that interviewees gave for the reduction of women's participation from local to central levels related mainly to the division of labour and community duties along gender lines, as well as to the still strong prejudices that accompany women's activism in the community, especially in remote and rural areas. Absence from, or spending time away from, the family is also still a luxury for many women who continue to undertake the lion's share of the unpaid work and care in a family (INSTAT 2010)⁵.

“Women are still too overwhelmed by unpaid work at home. They may manage to attend an event or participate in an action that does not interfere too much with their routine. On top of that the patriarchal mentality which persists keeps them away from public engagement at large. They probably know best what is

5 Time use survey 2011 in Albania documents as much as 84% of the unpaid work being undertaken by women and girls, compared to only 14% by men and boys.

not working and how it can be addressed but it is expected that they will present issues and then leave what is a man's job be done by men" (Female, CSO representative).

Age is also considered an important factor in determining trends in citizen activism. Although the literature makes much of the activism of youth (Hirt 2012) - young people supposedly form a new generation, free from the past repercussions of communism on citizenship activism - there are other factors which seem to make this demographic factor less influential than others. As one of the interviewees put it, '**...being an active citizen is not considered 'cool' by the young Albanians**'. Interviewees also stressed that the lack of awareness raising and educational approaches, both informal and formal, was also an important factor in fostering activism among young, future citizens.

"At home, young Albanians are raised by those parents who lived much of their life under totalitarian rule, and who might as a result lack the necessary comprehension or culture of active citizenship and who can therefore fail to act as role models for their offspring to follow" (Male, CSO representative).

On the other hand, school curricula tend to pay little or no attention to transmitting the necessary information about active citizenship, or to building the necessary skills and capacities to become such a citizen.

It was also claimed that youth organisations are given the least support. Youth organisations are poor in resources and rarely supported or trusted by donors. This limits the opportunities not only for youth organisations but also for young citizens in general to become more active. It should be noted, however, that regardless of their limited actions and opportunities, young people are believed to have the necessary ideas and energy to bring about change. In this sense, there is a significant burden of hope placed on the shoulders of Albanian youth, that they will provide the country with active and participatory citizens in the future.

Inhibiting factors

The qualitative approach explores what the quantitative findings of the Civil Society Index in Albania (IDM 2010) identify as major inhibiting factors for active citizenship and a stronger role of CS, such as the low perceived level of impact that the civil society sector is believed to have, the low level of transparency of the civil society sector, and the political influence that is believed to often dictate the activities and agendas of civil society organisations.

Our respondents shared the common perception that the level of impact within the civil society sector in Albania is quite limited. In addition, even where successful stories do exist, they receive little or no publicity. Citizens in general can therefore find it hard to believe that the activities of the civil society sector have any substantial contribution to addressing the important issues and problems that face the country, let alone those of a smaller scale. A larger degree of transparency should be considered not only with respect to finances but also in terms of responsiveness and efficiency.

“We need to do much more in promoting our work and achievements. The lack of transparency is not primarily a problem in financial areas, but rather with respect to the agenda and activities being carried out by civil society actors. Information sharing and awareness raising activities should therefore occupy a more central part of the work of many CSOs, so that citizens can know more about, and develop a greater sense of ownership over, the many activities being undertaken by civil society”
(Female CSO representative).

In terms of the harm that political influence can do to a stronger active citizenship, the key informants relate it not only to the past history of the country, but also to the present. In their opinion, people suffered an aftermath of political revenge when they were actively involved in certain movements or actions that might have threatened the interests of political powers.

"People continue to be scared and it is not only those who grew up under dictatorship. For more than two decades citizens have witnessed and experienced citizens being hunted down in politics and power, losing jobs or suffering other consequences for speaking their minds. Any negative experiences would require long and sustainable efforts to establish new standards and practices" (Female, CSO representative).

Strategies to promote active citizenship through CS organisations

It is found that new strategies need to be employed to encourage active citizenship and they need to be all-encompassing and address information sharing, awareness raising, skills and capacity building. Information should be available and accessible to citizens as the main 'door' through which they can enter the civil society arena. Civil society actors should make information and transparency important components of their work; informing and being accountable to donors or partners is not by itself enough.

"It is unrealistic to expect citizens to trust you if you're never in touch with them or you work remains in closed boxes. CSOs do little not only to involve citizens but also to inform them. My impression is that, overall, their primary audience is the donor and sometimes the decision makers. Citizens and groups of interests are often times just a tool or a channel for this bipartisan relationship to look functional" (Male, CSO representative).

The continuation and clear profile of an organisation, union or other CSS actor are a guarantee of greater citizen support and activism. Follow up activities and involvement of citizens in implementing, monitoring and evaluating the actions/initiatives are essential. Citizens should not only be made part of the process but sometimes even made leaders of the civil sector activities, giving them a sense of ownership which would definitely

strengthen their profile as active citizens and lead to greater degrees of activism in the future.

“It is overwhelming to see all the time, the same faces appearing at events targeting issues ranging from rural development, to women, to the environment...but you know, specialisation is important and commitment, of course! Only when you demonstrate these will citizens trust and count on you, and you can be more effective” (Female, CSO representative).

At the same time, there is an urgent need for civil society actors to turn their attention to ways of engaging and working for and with the citizens. Such engagement, where relevant and possible, should become a priority goal.

“For most CSOs their group of interest is only in their mind...no real communication and monitoring takes place” (Male, CSO representative).

This calls for part of civil society (especially those that base their activity on citizen participation) to become more driven by the interests of citizens rather than those of donors. Civil society actors should aim to move towards a citizen-centred approach in which priorities are set and followed by considering the interests and needs of citizens. A civil society which is detached from its citizens is not an inspiration for active citizenship.

Conclusions

As a result of Albania's history and cultural factors, the civil society sector is still new, fragile and under continuous change. As a result, its profile and impact is still not very clear or well understood by many Albanian citizens. The low level of awareness about the importance and agenda of the civil society sector, combined with other factors such as the perceived political influence of this sector and its generally low impact, seem to have

discouraged a greater number of citizens from actively participating.

The common perception of citizen participation and activism in Albania as very low is thought to be the result of the interplay of several influencing factors, among the most important those related to the effectiveness of the civil society sector and awareness of the issue. Several variations in active citizenship could be identified based on gender, age, ethnicity and geography. In general, political and religious participation is stronger than social participation; women are more likely to act at local level while men dominate at any level; the older generation is more active in the political sphere, whereas the youth, although more difficult to organise, stand for their own group interests.

Citizen participation should become a major priority for civil society actors, who will need to apply different strategies if they are to set about changing the landscape of Albania's civic participation. These strategies will need to be informed by the various trends, profiles and demographics of active citizens identified by this and other studies, as well as by stories of success. In particular, new strategies need to be employed to encourage and shape new trends of active citizenship in post-communist Albania and in addressing inhibiting factors such as the low perceived level of the ACSS's impact and transparency and the political influence that is believed to often dictate the agenda of ACSS actors.

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