

Research paper

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Maintaining the Boundary: Analyzing the Continuous Importance of Nonpartisanship for Croatian ‘Second Wave’ Advocacy NGOs

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Summary

Advocacy NGOs in Croatia often emphasize their nonpartisan identity, meaning that they do not publicly associate with political parties or declare their endorsement of electoral candidates. While such NGOs' behavior could be explained based on overall negative public perception of political parties, as well as funding conditions imposed by NGOs' donors, this article argues that the continuous nonpartisan identity of advocacy NGOs is further reaffirmed by a specific civil society discourse. Drawing on the analysis of in-depth interviews with senior members of nine Croatian NGOs, active in areas of human rights, the rule of law, and education, three relevant themes of civil society discourse reaffirming NGOs' nonpartisanship are outlined: (1) idea of civil society as an answer to malfunctioning state, (2) NGOs' legitimation based on autonomy and expertise, and (3) perception of political parties as an inherently limiting organizational form.

Keywords: NGOs, Civil Society, Political Parties, Nonpartisanship, Activism in Post-socialist Europe

Introduction

Advocacy non-governmental organizations (henceforth: NGOs) have played an important role in the development of activism in Croatia over the last three decades. Typically associated with the 'second wave' of activism (Stubbs, 2012), these NGOs were mostly established in the late 1990s and early 2000s and have been mainly focused on promoting causes such as the rule of law, democratization, and human rights (*ibid.*). These organizations often define themselves as nonparti-

san¹, meaning that they are careful to avoid any public association with political parties or declaring their endorsement of electoral candidates. Based on a specific position of nonpartisan expert, ‘second wave’ NGOs were successful in gaining their influence during the process of the country’s accession to the European Union, especially in promoting and supervising various legislative reform processes (Butterfield, 2016; Wunsch, 2016; Heideman, 2019). However, in recent years, we can observe that the position of the second wave NGOs as nonpartisan experts in policy processes has been weakening. On the one hand, this can be related to the restructuring of their relationship with the state institutions after the country’s long process of EU accession came to an end in 2013. Free of conditionality mechanisms of the pre-accession period, the state seems to have become less responsive to advocacy NGOs’ demands (*ibid.*). On the other hand, the identity of civil society representatives became “contested” (Stoyanova, 2018), since it used to be associated primarily with actors promoting left and liberal causes, and is more recently claimed by a heterogeneous group of actors, including right-wing and conservative organizations using the rhetoric of civil society, democracy and human rights in promoting their claims (Petričušić, Čehulić and Čepo, 2017; Cerovac, 2018; Vučković Juroš, Dobrotić and Flego, 2020). In addition, the continuous importance of nonpartisanship for one part of NGOs is particularly relevant considering that in recent years several NGOs and social movements, on both left and right side of the ideological spectrum, decided to form political parties.

Indeed, in spite of the processes described above, many of the ‘second wave’ advocacy NGOs still hold nonpartisanship to be an important part of their organizational identity. Starting from this observation, the paper aims to advance our understanding of the continuous importance of nonpartisanship for Croatian ‘second wave’ advocacy NGOs based on the analysis of interviews with experienced members of nine such organizations. It starts from the assumption that NGOs’ nonpartisanship remains important not only because of pragmatic strategic behavior, but also because of specific civil society discourse. The relevance of understanding NGOs’ nonpartisanship goes beyond the context of Croatia, as growing contradictions of the concept of civil society with regards to politics and ideology have been noted in postsocialist contexts as diverse as Bosnia and Herzegovina (Puljek-Shank and Fritsch, 2019), Bulgaria (Bakardjieva and Konstantinova, 2020), and Poland (Korolczuk, 2017, p. 4, in: Piotrowski, 2020, p. 210; Jezierska, 2018).

The paper proceeds in four steps. First, it argues for giving greater attention to civil society discourse in explaining the importance that nonpartisanship has for NGOs. Through historical contextualization of the NGOs’ development since the

¹ The term ‘non-partisan’ is used here in a narrow sense of ‘being unrelated to a political party’. For a discussion on broader usages of the term, see White and Ypi (2016).

1990s onwards, based on the literature discussing activism in wider postsocialist Europe, it points to the ways in which the concept of civil society and practice of civil society development structured the NGOs' relation to state and political parties. In the second section, it briefly introduces the development of advocacy NGOs' in Croatia. Third, it elaborates the paper's empirical strategy, in particular the purpose of in-depth interviews. Fourth, it outlines the findings through sections covering three themes detected in the analysis, and situates the article in the context of changing conceptualization of civil society in Eastern Europe.

Understanding Advocacy NGOs Nonpartisanship through Civil Society Discourse

What makes the nonpartisan position a critical feature of NGOs' work in the eyes of their leading activists? What motivates them to keep their distance from association with political parties or public endorsement of electoral contenders? At first sight, there may be several self-evident explanations for the attractiveness of such a position among NGOs, especially those with a long tradition and public exposure. First, a recent Eurobarometer survey showed that political parties in Croatia enjoy a very low level of public trust, with only 12 percent of citizens claiming that they trust political parties (European Commission, 2019), which makes the NGOs' distancing from party politics rather unsurprising.² Second, as advocacy NGOs typically rely on the financing of various donors, both private and public, their activities and organizational form are powerfully shaped by donors' implicit and explicit expectations (Hahn-Fuhr and Worschech, 2014; Bloodgood and Tremblay-Boire, 2017; see also Domes and Pavić, 2016). Given their precarious position of dependency, some NGOs may pragmatically keep away from public association with political parties in order to meet donors' funding regulations.

While acknowledging the fact that the abovementioned factors shape the NGOs' views on nonpartisanship, this paper contends that anti-party sentiment in the general public, as well as regulatory and financing conditions, do not offer a complete explanation of these organizations' nonpartisan positioning. Instead, the article argues that the NGOs' attitude towards state and political parties is at times reaffirmed by specific civil society discourse. The paper takes civil society to be delimited with several *frontiers*, as proposed by Mikuš based on the Gramscian conception of civil society (Mikuš, 2018), underlining the NGOs' continuous focus on the redefinition of boundaries between the 'sector of civil society' and other ostensibly self-standing sectors, such as the state or the economy (see also Bilić, 2011; Puljek-Shank and

² Comparable data for trust in NGOs are not collected within Standard Eurobarometer reports, but some reports point to a relatively low level of public trust in NGOs themselves (e.g., Bežovan and Matančević, 2011).

Fritsch, 2019). Nonpartisan position of advocacy NGOs is therefore treated as a part of a broader set of discourses related to the relationship between the civil society on the one side, and the state and political parties on the other.

In post-socialist Eastern Europe, civil society discourse gained importance during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when in the context of ‘the end of history’ (Fukuyama, 1992) liberal democracy became the model of development for formerly socialist regimes. Within the literature on democratization, one of the assumed preconditions of a successful transition into liberal democracy was civil society development (Bermeo, 2003). Despite its vague and inconsistent meaning, civil society became an important point of reference for academics, politicians, and activists (Kumar, 1993). A well-known definition of civil society describes it as “a realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules” (Diamond, 1994: 5). Western academic research of the time claimed that such autonomous civil society would necessarily contribute to the development of political culture and overall democratic consolidation of newly emerging democracies (Diamond, 1994; Keane, 1998).

The imperative of civil society development found its realization in non-governmental organizations, often resting on the uncritical assumption that this specific organizational form will undoubtedly benefit the revival of civil society (Mercer, 2002; Mastnak, 2005). Although NGOs came in many different shapes, in the eyes of the donors, they were expected to be staffed organizations able to provide expertise or services related to specific political issues (Stanton, 1999). With the increasing availability of financial resources and new regulatory frameworks for non-governmental organizing across Eastern Europe, the number of NGOs surged.³ By focusing most of their financing efforts on NGOs, donors’ preferences have by and large brought about a widespread conflation of NGOs and civil society (Mercer, 2002). What is more, donors’ programs often neglected other forms of civic association and pre-existing forms of civil society from the socialist period (Ekiert and Kubik, 2014; Giza-Poleszczuk, 2017).

In addition to placing high expectations on NGOs, the donors wanted NGOs to act as nonpartisan actors in order to avoid allegations of meddling into domestic affairs (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000; Gershman, 2004; Vetta, 2009). This assumption contained a sharp contradiction: while NGOs were supposed to foster citizens’ political participation based on a specific set of values and policy goals, they were also expected to maintain the image of disinterest in party politics. This, however,

³ In Croatia, for instance, their number grew from just below 11400 in 1985 to almost 52000 in 2014 (Vidačak and Petak, 2015).

turned out to be hard to implement, as advocacy organizations inherently engage with politicians and politics, at times even entering into conflicts with political parties. After all, NGOs were noted for substantial contribution to oppositional mobilization in several authoritarian and semi-authoritarian contexts of postsocialist Europe (see Beissinger, 2006; Fisher, 2006; Bunce and Wolchik, 2011).

The emphasis on nonpartisan organizing was not only a matter of donors' pragmatic preferences during the 1990s. The origins of this condition go to the heart of the 1990s mainstream conception of civil society, which saw its role primarily as a challenger to the overbearing power of the state (Baker, 1998, 1999). Meiksins Wood noted that such reasoning was particularly adequate for Eastern Europe of the 1990s where "the civil society/state antithesis" corresponded "neatly to the opposition of Solidarity to Party and State" (Meiksins Wood, 1995, p. 283). However, the agenda of civil society development was not promoted only by the intellectuals from abroad in the late 1980s. At the time, it had already been rooted in the legacies of dissident and oppositional activism. In domestic intellectual circles of various socialist countries, in particular Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the civil society was embedded in the narrative of anti-politics, which was popular among domestic liberal intellectuals (Navrátil and Pospíšil, 2014; Cizewska Martyńska, 2015). It also served as a symbol of modernization that Eastern European societies should strive for, thus gaining prominence in the East-West intellectual dialogue (Ivancheva, 2011; Gagyí and Ivancheva, 2019). Similar utilization of civil society as the oppositional framing was also present in the late phase of Yugoslav socialism, although arguably not to the same extent and with some variation across republics (see Stubbs, 1996; Mastnak, 2005; Fink Hafner, 2015).

The tension between civil society and political parties was problematized by Foley and Edwards in their seminal article (Foley and Edwards, 1996), in which they classify assumptions on the relationship between civil society and democratic governance into two similar but distinct intellectual camps, labeled *Civil Society I* and *Civil Society II*. Both camps acknowledge the importance of civil society, but with a different idea of its role in democratization. The former sees civil society as a tool that enables learning and strengthening of democratic participation, while the latter sees civil society as a tool of control and a counterweight to the potentially oppressive behavior of the state (*ibid.*). Although *Civil Society I* and *Civil Society II* emphasize the importance of civil society's autonomy for distinct reasons, both argumentative approaches marginalize political parties and related institutions within their visions of civil society (*ibid.*). As an important example of such reasoning, Foley and Edwards take Diamond's essay on civil society's contribution to democratic consolidation (*ibid.*). Indeed, although Diamond recognizes the party system as an important factor in democratic consolidation, his characterization of civil so-

ciety underlines a sharp distinction from partisanship: civil society is described as an alternative mode of interest aggregation, praised for its ability to cut across various cleavages, including the partisan ones (Diamond, 1994, p. 9).

Early empirical research on activism in post-socialist Europe during the 1990s and the 2000s followed such conceptualization, often privileging non-governmental organizations and excluding political parties from their definitions of civil society (Kopecký and Mudde, 2003). The conception of the civil society as the third sphere, which sees civil society as emancipated and categorically different from state or market, spread across diverse parts of scholarship, making it overlook the structuring power of the state and hierarchical relations present among civil society actors (Chandhoke, 2001).

Advocacy NGOs in Croatia: from the Margins to the Mainstream and Back to the Margins?

Advocacy NGOs went through various phases of development in the Croatian context. In their earliest form, NGOs were typically created in response to war-related emergencies, based by and large on the already existing feminist and environmentalist collectives and organizations that developed during the 1980s (Stubbs, 1996; Bilić, 2012). Although they played a crucial role in relieving the heavy consequences of war, actors such as the 'Anti-War Campaign of Croatia' were often declared the enemy of the nationalist regime and had only a limited influence on state institutions (Stubbs, 2001; Bežovan, 2003; Bilić, 2012; Bilić and Janković, 2012). As the nationalist regime lost to the center-left coalition in 2000 and Croatia commenced its process of accession to the European Union, advocacy NGOs became part and parcel of the political mainstream. They were particularly noted for building their expertise in an increasing number of policy areas and successfully advancing a variety of agendas. Corollary to these processes, NGOs were putting an increased emphasis on the professionalization of their work (Stubbs, 2007).

The most recent phase of NGOs' development started approximately around 2010. As Croatia's long process of EU accession, and especially the process of accession negotiations, was coming to its end, organizations lost substantial strategic leverage stemming from EU conditionality mechanisms that used to secure them privileged access to various policy processes and an important role in assessing the country's progress in undertaking EU-related reforms (Wunsch, 2016). With international actors' attention moving away from Croatia, NGOs' specific legitimation provided by the international actors was also gone (Heideman, 2019). In that sense, 'post-accession Croatia' is not exceptional, as similar changes in NGOs' relationship to the state were encountered in other Eastern European countries as well (e.g., Fagan, 2005; O'Dwyer, 2012, 2013; Sloopmaeckers, 2017). Although the EU and

other external actors may have empowered Eastern European NGOs in terms of resources and influence, the NGOs' interaction with donors and other democracy-promoting actors heavily standardized their work and made them dependent on externally created agendas, which in turn increased their detachment from grassroots movements and social problems relevant in their immediate domestic context (Ishkanian, 2007; Hahn-Fuhr and Worschech, 2014; Ishkanian, 2014).

Adding to the changing opportunities and threats after Croatia acceded the EU in 2013, advocacy NGOs' position was openly contested and damaged by right-wing conservative NGOs and social movements for the first time since the 1990s. Right-wing actors proved capable of broad mobilization through mechanisms of participatory democracy, and framing their goals through the language of democracy and human rights, while carefully avoiding association with racism or homophobia (Petričušić, Čehulić and Čepo, 2017; Cerovac, 2018; Vučković Juroš, Dobrotić and Flego, 2020). Pressed between the loss of political influence, which they used to enjoy as 'watchdog organizations' during the EU accession process, and the rise of counter-contenders on the radical right, the advocacy NGOs' influential position of nonpartisan experts started to weaken. Although it is impossible to generalize this observation to all organizations, these two processes revealed a dire discrepancy between many NGOs' capacity for advocacy activity, which was high, and their capacity for popular mobilization, which remained relatively low.

Finally, several recently emerging political parties, on both left and right, have a strong background in NGO activism. The origins of political parties such as 'Zagreb is ours', 'Workers' Front' and 'New Left' on the left, or 'In the Name of the Family – Project Homeland' on the right, can be traced back to long-term non-electoral activism in NGOs and social movements (see also Cepić and Kovačić, 2015). These actors can be qualified as movement parties or hybrid parties, i.e., those parties that combine a non-electoral type of strategic action with engagement in the electoral competition (Kitschelt, 2006; Chironi and Fittipaldi, 2017; Della Porta *et al.*, 2017). The capacity of these new actors to engage in protest mobilization and advocacy activity in parallel to participating in electoral competition, may further challenge the position of advocacy NGOs as actors that operate exclusively in the non-electoral sphere.

A framework for understanding strategic change in Croatian activism was proposed by Stubbs, who systematizes the recent activist history through 'three waves' of generational change (Stubbs, 2012). Each of the three waves was marked by a different type of actor. In the 1990s, activism was organized through networks of projects focusing on anti-war activities and humanitarian relief. In the late 1990s activism started to take the shape of professionalized NGOs, while since the late 2000s it has been increasingly moving towards mobilization through social move-

ments (*ibid.*). The process of change, according to Stubbs, involved a particular shift in the meaning that activists ascribed to civil society: “as an emerging and, perhaps, aspiring, frame in the first wave of activism (...) as a conventional and taken-for-granted institutional paradigm for the second wave, and as a conservative force to be rejected as largely irrelevant, in the third wave” (*ibid.*, p. 26). Parallel to this, while the NGOs played an essential role in the first two waves of activism, the ‘third wave’ brought new tendencies in activists’ strategic behavior, as “for most of the new wave activists, the NGO shape is, either irrelevant, or (...) a useful means of attracting project-based funding which can then be used for wider political aims” (*ibid.*, p. 14). Also, the third wave activism brought to renewal of emphasis on the issues of socioeconomic inequality and neoliberalism.

Although the ‘three waves’ framework rightly emphasizes changing activists’ perception of organizing through NGOs, it is important to note that many of the ‘second wave’ advocacy NGOs are still active and can at times represent an important resource for newly developing forms of activism (Stubbs, 2012; Cepić and Kovačić, 2015; Dolenc, Doolan, and Tomašević, 2017). The imperative of nonpartisanship remains self-evident for many of these organizations as they attempt to find their way between various actors and causes.

Methodology

While many diverse approaches and methods can be subsumed under the umbrella term of discourse analysis (Nikander, 2012), they mostly share the assumption that “social interactions cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning” (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p. 3). Discourse analysis is particularly useful in understanding the interactive processes happening between actors’ texts and their context (Lindekilde, 2014). More specifically, discourse analysis can help us understand how actors choose among different arguments in a specific context (*ibid.*). For this purpose, the research utilized in-depth interviews to enable a detailed description of interviewees’ perceptions and interpretations (Della Porta, 2014). In-depth interviewing in the discourse analytic approach relies on the assumption that there is “no one truly accurate version of participants’ action and belief” (Talja, 1999, p. 465) meaning that, in a way, in each interview another version of the object of discussion, such as the civil society or the state, is created. And while the potential for nuanced analysis represents a benefit of in-depth interviews, it is equally important to note that using in-depth interviews as the sole source of data in discourse analysis has an important weakness. Namely, the interviewer necessarily guides the interviewing process, meaning that the resulting transcripts are not an outcome of naturally occurring data, but rather the researcher’s interview agenda (Nikander, 2012). Indeed, the very selection of research problem is partly

motivated by the author's past experience of participation in advocacy NGOs, and the starting observation that nonpartisanship is often taken for granted by the NGO 'practitioners' (Silverman, 2015).

The interviews involved nine representatives of nine different NGOs, all of them officially established in the period between 1998 and 2003, and all of them active in areas of human rights, gender equality, social inclusion, and education. All organizations predominantly employ personnel with higher education degrees, often experts in various policy areas, and overall possess professionalized and routinized fundraising procedures. Since the interviews addressed potentially sensitive organizational memory and assessments regarding organizations' future strategy, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to all interview participants (see Kaiser, 2012). For this reason, participants' quotes are associated with pseudonyms.⁴ The process of interviewee selection focused on detecting key informants with long-term experience of employment or volunteering within an NGO (see Table 1), assuming that their answers would give the best possible picture of organizational perspective.

Table 1. Data About Interviewees and Their NGOs at the Time of Interviewing

Pseudonym	Interviewee's experience in NGOs at the time of interviewing (in years)	Position in the organization at the time of interviewing	Duration of related NGO's activity at the time of interviewing (in years)
Dajana	17	employee	19
Darko	18	executive	18
Gordana	15	employee	18
Karolina	15	executive	16
Kristina	10	executive	18
Luka	20	volunteer	19
Mateja	10	executive	14
Slaven	13	executive	19
Tena	6	employee	19

The interviews were analyzed through several stages, in part following the coding principles of grounded theory that allows for both systematicity and flexibility in analysis (Charmaz, 2006). It started with the process of open coding, the

⁴ Pseudonyms retain the information on gender.

purpose of which was to get an elementary grasp of the data, meaning that the codes used were mostly *descriptive*, *process*, and *in vivo* codes (see Saldaña, 2012). In the following round of analysis, portions of description that seemed related were sorted in order to observe their patterns and create new codes based on the previous ones. Throughout this process, several memos noting variation and interesting paradoxes within the data were generated. In the final stage, which stretched into the write-up, some of the previous codes were omitted or subsumed under other codes. The analysis followed the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), meaning that codes introduced in later stages were continuously confronted with previously ascribed codes. During the write-up of the report, the interviewees were offered to read an early draft of the analysis, provide comments, and check the quotes from their respective interviews as a way of preventing deductive disclosure of individual and/or organizational identity (see Kaiser, 2012). In order to give a more complete picture of the interaction between the researcher and the interviewee, most of the quotations below include both questions and answers.

Civil Society as an Answer to the Dysfunctional State

In order to understand the significance of the nonpartisan positioning of NGOs, it is necessary to start from a more fundamental question: How do NGOs make sense of civil society? The aim of this question was to elicit the characteristics that interviewees use in defining civil society. The assumption behind this interviewing strategy was that persistent valuing of nonpartisan position is reinforced through NGO activists' discursive construction of their specific role and purpose in the political context or, in other words, NGOs' legitimation (see Heideman, 2019). Throughout the interviews, the definitions of civil society abounded with the notion of the state and its institutions. In a way, civil society is represented as an ideal reflection of what the state should be and what it should be doing. Relying on spatial metaphors such as "a sphere of critical thinking and organizing" (Gordana)⁵ or "a space between politics and business" (Slaven), civil society is defined through its role of supervising, correcting, or complementing the state institutions. Where the state fails to create good policy, civil society needs to step in and contribute to better decision-making (Gordana). Civil society needs to represent public interest (Slaven, Luka, Dajana), something the state is not doing. Civil society needs to contribute with its expertise (Darko, Tena), which is scarce within state institutions.

To be sure, throughout the interviews, the state takes on many faces and symbols: an elected politician, a career civil servant, the current government cabinet or its specific parts. Notwithstanding these various embodiments of the state, the inter-

⁵ All quotation identifications are pseudonyms.

viewees offered two explanations for its weaknesses and wrongdoings. On the one hand, the state is not motivated to protect the public interest. Sharing her impressions from everyday contacts with public servants and officials, one interviewee said that “people who work in civil service are typically not motivated by the interest to contribute to the public good. Typically, the sole motivation is a secure job position or something similar” (Kristina). What distinguishes civil society from the state is the relative absence of private, personal interests. On the other hand, the state is not governed by high professional standards, as elaborated by another interviewee:

Civil society in Croatia is trying to take the best [practices] from both the public sector and the business sector. The best from the public sector is that organizations take on the topics that are not profitable and for which the business sector has no interest; while, on the other hand, in dealing with these topics they use high professional standards, which are more typical for the business sector [compared to the public one]. (Slaven)

The question is not only whether the state keeps in mind public interest, but also whether it does so efficiently. In the quote above, the state is declared inefficient, and the market (business sector) is described as a model of efficiency. It is by describing the state as “the inefficient sector” that interviewees construct a meaningful place for civil society within their political context. In more general terms, the interviewees’ reasoning echoes the *bureaucratic overload thesis*, which, according to Colin Hay, claims that the state bureaucracy is dominated by civil servants who are primarily interested in advancing their jobs and privileges instead of following the public service ethos (Hay, 2007). Analogously, basic assumptions of the *political overload thesis* could be found in interviewees’ descriptions of political parties. According to this thesis, political parties are driven by the sole purpose of maximizing their vote gain through the short-sighted instrumentalization of policy in fulfilling the immediate demands of the electorate (*ibid.*). I return to this point in the final section of the analysis.

As another interviewee puts it, contrary to political parties, which are inherently motivated by taking over power, civil society is free from such motivations:

Civil society is evidently different from the state because the state also has some institutions and structure, and political parties have a clear goal of getting into government. Parties have a clear preference for that form of power, for governing, and civil society does not. Civil society aims to influence, aims to give space for the voice of citizens, for public policies which answer to the needs of people. (...) But, as I said, their [NGOs’] primary preference is for influencing, and not for governing, not for taking over positions of power within the state hierarchy. (Dajana)

Here, the interviewee constructs a crucial distinction between the aim of governing and the aim of influencing the government. In the meaning-making of the interviewee, although the outcome of both processes may be the same, this distinction serves to underline the consistency of civil society as opposed to the power-driven behavior of political parties. It also reiterates the conceptualization of civil society promoted by the scholarship on democratic transition and consolidation discussed in the introductory section, which, according to Baker (1999), emphasizes the civil society's function of aggregating and mediating social interests to the state, but without direct participation in government.

As discussed in extant research, although the differentiation between the civil society and the state may be simply interpreted as an analytical tool, it also contains critical normative assumptions and ideological leanings (Vetta, 2012) and can ultimately serve to cast civil society in the role of modernizing force struggling against the backwardness of the state or society in general (*ibid.*; Mikuš and Dokić, 2015).

Legitimation of Autonomy through Expertise

When talking about civil society in ideal terms, interviewees emphasize autonomy⁶ as one of its key strengths. Autonomy in interviewees' accounts does not stand merely for an ability to self-govern or rely on one's own resources. It is a matter of the interviewees' sense of purpose and value in what they are doing within a broader political context. The following two interview excerpts exemplify this reasoning:

Q: What are the strengths of civil society?⁷

A: Its autonomy in the sense of being autonomous from partisan and ideological orientations. On the other hand, autonomy from the governmental sector, its current development strategy and structure of the state apparatus. (...)

Q: Why did you, among other things, emphasize autonomy? How is autonomy contributing to civil society?

A: I think that the quality of results, in whatever I do, stems in a greater part from impartial and objective observation of the context, and this is my comparative advantage. (Darko)

I mean, one of the values that we promote is autonomy. We want to somehow reach decisions impartially and decide on what is really the best thing to do, what is the best thing to propose in a certain situation. (Kristina)

⁶ Translated from the original language: *neovisnost* and *autonomija*, used interchangeably in the interviews. Here, both terms are always translated as autonomy.

⁷ In excerpts which present the conversation between the researcher and the interviewee, the researcher's questions are labelled with Q and the interviewees' answers are labelled with A.

The above quotations show that autonomy is not meant only in terms of its immediate purpose, which is to enable an organization to be governed through the will of its membership. It bears a more implicit meaning, which is to allow the neutrality of knowledge. In this sense, autonomy is related to achieving an objective perspective, “cleared” from partisanship and ideology. Another participant, in a slightly different manner, mentions that autonomy allows NGOs to “*de facto* tell everyone and anyone how things really are” (Tena).

The notion of autonomy is strongly related to the idea of expertise in accounts of their own work among NGO activists. This can be observed more explicitly when the interviewees juxtapose civil society to political parties:

Q: What is it that civil society can do and parties cannot?

A: First and foremost, we have direct experiences and insights in the community. In society. (...) And you could say that in some specific sectors a lot has been done. This has made organizations experienced, and they gained expertise. (Luka)

Similar to the above quotation, when asked about the strengths of civil society, all interviewees emphasize direct contact with people and communities, i.e., a type of *specialized representation*. According to this reasoning, NGOs have a unique capacity to detect and communicate grievances of specific constituencies towards decision-makers. Unlike state bureaucracies and politicians, which are almost universally illustrated by the interviewees as inert, detached, or incompetent, NGOs are more flexible and capable of quick reaction. On the other hand, within their description of everyday professional activity, interviewees often underline that they possess specialized information collected through their practical experience in activities and research in related problem areas. This is more directly related to the idea of expertise as *specialized knowledge*.

In her work on Polish think tanks, Jeziarska offers an illuminating perspective on how think tanks, as a particular class of boundary organizations (Medvetz, 2012), engage in a continuous negotiation game in the various fields in which they participate (Jeziarska, 2015, 2018). Findings in the rest of this section largely echo the insights of her study. Although the interviewees’ accounts of civil society abounded with the notion of autonomy, as interviews proceeded, it came out sharply that autonomy is far from being easily assumed. On the contrary, it is continuously negotiated through a tense relationship with the state that structures the role, the resources, and the opportunities for NGOs’ influence. This was particularly clear in the following interviewee’s reflections on the role of the state:

Today we can talk about an organized form of civil society, meaning that there is a system and structure for organized civil society on the national level, which consists of, on the one hand, responsible state bodies, which coordinate, finance, or in

any other way support the work of civil society organizations. On the other hand, the system enables a certain coordination between specific representatives of the organizations within the civil society sector. (Darko)

The statement above points to a subtle contradiction occasionally found when discussing what autonomy means to interviewees. While the autonomy of civil society is emphasized *per se*, it is at times also perceived as well-structured by the state. This is where the negotiated nature of autonomy comes out sharply. Legal and institutional regulation is consistently perceived as one of the factors which contributed to the rapid development of NGOs during the 2000s. Several interviewees explicitly mentioned positive effects on civil society development of bodies such as the governmental Advisory Board for Civil Society Development, the National Foundation for Civil Society Development, and the governmental Office for Cooperation with NGOs (see also Vidačak and Petak, 2015). These institutions are almost exclusively managed by the government, putting the responsibility of creating the environment in which civil society can either develop or degrade its autonomy on the state. Indeed, notwithstanding positive aspects of support, the increased engagement of the state in the promotion of civil society has also meant increased normative activity and supervision of NGOs by the state (Domes and Pavić, 2016).

The perception of the state as a powerful actor in structuring NGOs' autonomy was galvanized between 2003 and 2013 during Croatia's process of accession to the European Union. As already mentioned in the introductory section, in this period, policy-oriented NGOs played one of the central roles in monitoring and assessing Croatia's reform progress in many policy areas. One of the interviewees referred to this period by saying that NGOs "used to have power". She elaborated what is meant by "power" as follows:

We had power in the sense that we were, first, perceived as useful and important. And, second, we were a watchdog. We were able to tell Europe and Brussels what was going on. Then they would shed light on things that had to be done through their progress reports. (Tena)

As narrated by the interviewee, the EU accession process in a way structured interactions between the government, the NGOs, and the EU institutions. Embedded in EU-related policy processes in the capacity of expert specialists, NGO representatives were able to use their position as leverage in their interaction with state institutions. The interviewees, however, acknowledge that this pattern of interaction lost its influence soon after Croatia's EU accession process came to its end. Without the ability to make claims on the institutions' progress in meeting expectations created by the EU, the NGOs found themselves in uncharted territory.

Increase of policy-specific expertise and overall professionalization is perceived by the interviewees as a mechanism that strongly helped them have their say in policy processes. It came, however, as a double-edged sword: while it helped in gaining influence within policy processes, it pushed their organizations away from broader public mobilization through at least two mechanisms. First, increasing administrative tasks related to project-based work burdened organizational resources, and did not leave the time and flexibility needed for proactive political strategy (Gordana). Second, the interviewees feel frustrated with complex, policy-based rhetoric, unable to successfully communicate their core messages to broader audiences.⁸ As an interviewee put it: “Go and try to explain ‘transparency’ or ‘good governance’ or ‘needs assessment’ to an average Joe” (Tena).

The ambiguous meaning of professionalization resonates with recent research on Croatian NGOs’ legitimation strategies in the period before EU accession (Heideman, 2017, 2019). According to Heideman, mechanisms such as professionalization and formalization were related to successful legitimation of NGOs in front of international donors and national government in the period before the EU accession (Heideman, 2019). These mechanisms, however, did not do much for legitimation of NGOs on the level of grassroots activism and general public (*ibid.*).

For some interviewees, their distance from citizens is further aggravated by underdeveloped political culture and brief tradition of parliamentary democracy (Mateja, Slaven). Nonetheless, one interviewee self-critically reflected on the NGOs’ tendency to moderate their demands and work exclusively within a ‘realist framework’ of political needs:

I think that, related to professionalization, we may have confined ourselves into giving policy suggestions that are realistic, that are within the system. In order not to destroy it, but rather develop it slowly. For a large number of unsatisfied people, who are economically, professionally and personally exhausted, this is no longer enough. (Dajana)

As the interviewee notices, the problem of NGOs’ inability to mobilize is not only one of rhetoric or political context. It is related to substantial demands and the fact that they may not be answering to the immediate grievances of dissatisfied people.

⁸ The issue of specific language used in civil society development has been ironically addressed in the document ‘Ubleha for Idiots: An absolutely unnecessary guide through civil society development and project management for locals and internationals in B&H and beyond’, accessible at: <https://www.mreza-mira.net/vijesti/clanci/ubleha-for-idiots/> (accessed: 15 June 2021). See also Stubbs (2007).

Parties Will Be Parties

The interviewees' perspective on the potential for greater engagement in party politics is outlined in the third and last part of the findings section. Although, as was previously shown, they feel their position is endangered, interviewees do not see greater politicization and engagement in party politics as an answer. When asked about their assessment of parties and electoral initiatives stemming from NGOs, they would often declare them to be generally positive or legitimate, but would pay great attention to emphasize that this is not their own answer to the situation. The most important argument supporting this position is that parties are imminently leading to compromise and politicking. The contrast between NGOs and political parties in that regard is stark. NGOs are described by interviewees as democratic, horizontally structured organizations that nurture dialogue and facilitate different opinions within their membership. On the opposite side, political parties are described as authoritarian organizations with a strong vertical structure that supports single-mindedness. Claims about the imminent characteristics of organizational form, present throughout the interview transcripts, are best exemplified in the following interview excerpt:

A: I think that we should really be able to protect the zones of political work and political pressure that remain nonpartisan.

Q: Why is it important to keep the two zones detached? Work in civil society, and work in parties?

A: Because civil society, unlike parties, is capable of limitless critique. And a political party cannot win the elections and cannot exist if it behaves as civil society. (...) I doubt that 'Zagreb je naš'⁹, if it comes to power in Zagreb, will be able to openly advocate for the cause of my organization.

Q: So, your personal doubts are related to the potential for compromising the critical attitude?

A: Yes. I think that's the key. If you're in a political party, your key method becomes compromise and accepting political dealership. (Gordana)

The key claim to be observed in the above statement is that the party, even if it is very close to activists, will compromise its stance sooner or later. This is an inherent feature of party politics, which is defined by the interviewee as "trade" or "dealership". Sometimes, interviewees consider this to be an outcome of the way in which the rules of party politics are structured:

Advocacy organizations usually articulate certain expertise in a certain area, and they are interested in that specific question. Entering [the party politics] would

⁹ The interviewee refers to a newly emerging electoral actor that has brought together activists with experience of activism in several different NGOs.

definitely mean a compromise regarding your specific question because you have to take care of different policies. (Dajana)

The interviewee contends that the way political parties work is not adequate for NGOs because of NGOs' typical focus on single issues and specialized expertise. It is important to note that, for another interviewee, such an opinion is not only a matter of rationalized comparison between 'pros and cons' of the two organizational forms. It is also related to self-perceived personal values, identity, and character. Parties are therefore described as an undemocratic and inadequate environment for people with strong critical opinions (Kristina). These are all elements of what can be described as the essentialism of organizational form.

In addition to the essentialism of organizational form, interviewees also referred to the issue of public credibility. All of them assessed any association with political parties, even implicit, as damaging. The potential damage is once again related to the maintenance of expertise.

For instance, we have just produced a publication on plagiarizing. How would the public receive it if we were a political party and not an NGO? As an NGO, we are perceived as experts who intervene. If it was published by a political party, it would be instantly disqualified as politicking. (...) If we were a party, I could never get to a ministry and talk to a state secretary about any anti-corruption programs. However, since we have been working on this as an NGO for years, he invited us. (Slaven)

The characteristic of expertise, with all its positive and negative sides, has already been unequivocally detected in the analysis up to now. The interview segment above exemplifies how the NGOs' strategic assessment of threats is consequential to the way interviewees see the distinction between an NGO and a party. In short, as mentioned above, getting closer to a certain political party or transforming into a political party could do significant harm to the image of an expert organization. The same interviewee elaborates:

As an NGO, you can work with more segments [of society], you can work with more people, you can have access. (...) I do not perceive it as drastic when a nun or a religion teacher comes to one of our seminars. (...) But it shows a certain openness. Would a nun come if we were about to become a political platform? I'm not sure. And we need this [openness]. When an NGO associates with a party, you necessarily lose part of that. (Slaven)

Being independent from political parties also facilitates the approach of an NGO to different social groups. As the interviewee above emphasizes, becoming a political party or associating with one can damage openness and drive away dif-

ferent groups of citizens. Another important aspect of perceived risks found in the interviews is the risk of the irreversibility of transformation, meaning that once an NGO associates with a political party, there is no way back (Tena).

Concluding Remarks: Uncertain Prospects of Navigating Nonpartisanship

In order to advance understanding of NGOs' nonpartisan position, this article investigated the purpose that advocacy NGOs in Croatia construct for themselves in their political context. Following this aim, it described elements of discourse that experienced activists of 'second wave' NGOs associate with notions of civil society and its relationship with the state and political parties. The study has three main limitations. First, typical of qualitative research design, especially when applied to complex and ambiguous concepts, it is not possible to generalize or claim that the findings are representative of NGOs' behavior in Croatia. Second, due to its principal focus on the NGO – political party nexus, the study did not give equal attention to another important topic detected once the interviews were already done: the ways in which NGOs make sense of their relationship with the market, another sphere commonly taken to be distinct from civil society by both scholars and practitioners. Third, the study focused only on the advocacy NGOs pertaining to one segment of the ideological spectrum, meaning that it may not be equally informative for understanding the strategy of right-wing and conservative advocacy NGOs. All three shortcomings, however, point to pathways for possible future research with a more comprehensive and comparative empirical design.

Notwithstanding its limitations, the study allowed for descriptive insight into arguments associated with the civil society, state, and political parties, which inform NGOs' strategic behavior. Based on the analysis of in-depth interviews, three central themes were detected. The first theme occurring throughout the transcripts is the one of a malfunctioning state. Contrary to numerous negative features of the state, such as hierarchical bureaucracy, inefficiency, and self-interest, the interviewees claim that civil society plays a relatively positive role. In their accounts, civil society is typically illustrated as democratic, efficient, and driven by public interest. The second theme is the one of autonomy, which is meant not only in the sense of self-governance but also in the sense of NGOs' impartiality from partisan interests and identities. Autonomy is, however, not self-evident, but rather an outcome of continuous negotiation between NGOs and the state, uncovering an important contradiction: NGOs are supposed to supervise or complement the state and, at the same time, rely on its support and resources. The third theme is about the perception of party politics as heavily structured and essentially negative. This theme uncovers the fact that the distancing of NGOs from political parties is not merely a matter of pragmatic adaptation to generally strong anti-party sentiment or lack of

politicians' credibility in the general public. The non-electoral strategy is substantiated by essentializing notions of what political parties are and how they are inevitably conditioned by particular rules of the electoral arena.

Overall, the NGO activists included in the study see civil society and its relationship with the state and party politics in line with the conception of civil society promoted since the early 1990s across Eastern Europe. This conception, as aptly put by White, paints civil society as "an embodiment of social virtue confronting political vice" (White, 1994, p. 376). At the same time, the interviewees are well-aware of the changing context for NGO activism, acknowledging that the framework of their activity has been ever more changing in the past decade. Almost without exception, they attest to the precarious position of their organizations and the limited impact of their advocacy activities. On the one hand, political elites are not particularly interested in NGOs as expert advocates, the role in which they thrived before the EU accession. On the other hand, the re-emergence of right-wing conservative counter-contenders has once again pointed to the need for a greater mobilizing capacity of liberal and left-wing actors. Both aspects of change imply that the second wave advocacy NGOs' ability to navigate political processes as nonpartisan actors is becoming an increasingly difficult task.

In recent years, a growing body of literature has noted important changes in forms and strategies of activism in postsocialist Europe more broadly. Researchers have noted the emergence of actors that are critical of professional advocacy NGOs, especially in various forms of informal and everyday activism (see Jacobsson and Saxonberg, 2013; Jacobsson, 2015; Fagan and Sircar, 2017; Bieber and Brentin, 2018). Most importantly, civil society, which used to be conceptualized in academic research as a discreet sector of a particular type of formal organizations (Chandoke, 2001), is now conceived in more relational and processual terms, allowing us to investigate how actors become allies or avoid each other beyond dichotomies that used to dominate the civil society literature (Jacobsson and Korolczuk, 2017; Mikuš, 2018). Such an approach proves particularly relevant in investigating the relationship between non-electoral and electoral forms of organizing in the Eastern European postsocialist contexts. Given the increasing disillusionment with political parties and representative democracy, the goal of understanding this complex relationship should play an important part in the regional research on activism.

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