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Estonian NGOs at the Crossroads of Professionalization and Grassroots Activism

Mikko Lagerspetz

Introduction: This article provides an overview of Estonian civil society and its nongovernmental organizations, highlighting the low rates of association membership and active participation, as compared to other European countries. Particular attention is paid to discussing the NGO-government cooperation, including both positive and negative outcomes of such cooperation. As the author shows, driven by neo-liberal ideals, governmental officials often see both businesses and NGOs as public service providers. In turn, opening public project tenders to these private organizations increases competition among NGOs, as well as between NGOs and businesses. Such competition for funding pushes NGOs to professionalize and adopt professional practices heavily grounded in efficiency at the expense of other public values and NGOs' own missions. Consequently, NGOs may lose public trust and their active membership may decline. The author calls NGO leaders to pay closer attention to these tendencies, and to seek alternative sources of revenue, so that they are better able to safeguard their autonomy from government.

Abstract: This article researches the history and contemporary state of Estonian civil society, focusing on citizen participation and NGO-government relations. Although the number of registered NGOs has increased in numbers in the past two decades, the rates of membership and active participation remain low. Drawing on data collected from Estonian NGOs in 2005 and 2008, the article discusses the dynamics of the NGO-government collaboration in the public policy-making and implementation process. Increasing reliance of NGOs on public funding has led to the professionalization of NGOs and the adoption of efficiency-driven management practices. Among other outcomes, this is leading to the erosion of citizen's trust in civil society and NGO's own concerns about their long-term sustainability.

Keywords: NGO-government collaboration, professionalization, service contracting, policy-making.

This article provides an overview of the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or the so-called third sector, in Estonia. More specifically, it discusses prominent features of the sector's development in the 2000s, including an ongoing professionalization of organizations and the emergence of symbiotic relationships with the state and local authorities. On the one hand, such development could be seen as the strengthening civil society due to the increased access of NGOs to public resources, and the third sector's more established social position. On the other hand, such development could lead to the weakening of the NGO function as a central component of civil society.

Professionalization of organizations and the increased importance of professional management could be viewed as the sector's adaptive strategies developed in the face of the changing environmental demands. While these strategies enable organizations to take advantage of new opportunities, they may also lead organizations to neglect important civic values that the sector performs. In this respect, these developments in Estonia resemble the third sector situation in many other countries, especially in the Western world, by resembling

among other things a global change in governance (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). Meanwhile, every society is unique, and its development is molded by specific institutional conditions and social tradition.

This paper will further focus on analyzing the relationships between the public and the third sector in Estonia during the first decade of the 2000s. The empirical data for the study were collected through various research projects conducted at the Centre for Civil Society Research and Development (KUAK) at the Tallinn University. I will first define the concept of civil society, and will then describe the third sector's current developments in Estonia.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE THIRD SECTOR

In contemporary social theories, 'civil society' as a term is both popular and ambiguous. In this respect it can be compared with such concepts as 'social capital,' 'political culture,' 'identity,' or even 'society' itself (Sundback 2007). The lack of a precise definition, however, is not necessarily a shortcoming, as openness to different interpretations can create links between theoretical debates about empirically diverse phenomena. Since the 1980s, the term 'civil society' has signified the relationships between democracy, political participation, new forms of civic activism, voluntary organizing, as well as alternative ways of providing social welfare services. Historically, the new interest in civil society coincided with the processes of democratization and capitalist modernization in Eastern Europe and the Third World. The inclusion of the concept of civil society in theoretical debates over these developments has established high political relevance of this theoretical concept.

Current theories of civil society are preceded by works of Thomas Hobbes and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who represent two different traditions in how they use the term civil society (for a historical overview, see e.g., Cohen and Arato 1992, or Dahlkvist 1995). In his treatise, *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes contrasted "Commonwealth Civil" as a proxy for civilized society with a stipulated state of nature, in which relations between humans are not regulated by any legal order. Hegel, on the other hand, described "die bürgerliche Gesellschaft" (or, in English, "the bourgeois society") as a specific sphere of life between the government and the family in his *Philosophy of Right* (1820). Likewise, in his reflections on democracy in America (1840-1847), Alexis de Tocqueville uses the term "free institutions" to describe a social sphere, where citizens' voluntary associations stand as guarantors against the danger of democracy turning into a "tyranny of the masses." In these early theorists' works, one can trace the beginnings of the two main ways of defining civil society – either as a society as a whole organized in a civilized way, or as some of elements of a civilized society. Both types of definitions have stood the test of time; the first definition is commonly used by political scientists, and the second is used by sociologists, who regard civil society as a particular social sphere and/or a set of social institutions.

In his effort to synthesize these two definitions, Ernest Gellner (1994-1996: 5-12) suggested a combination of a wider and a narrower definition. On the one hand, civil society is comprised of a collection of non-governmental institutions, which are strong enough to prevent the state from atomizing and dominating over the rest of society. Gellner emphasizes that these institutions are different not only from state structures, but also from traditional,

rigid, status-based segmental communities (such as the extended family, estate, etc.). On the other hand, however, the term “refers to a total society within which the non-political institutions are not dominated by the political ones, and do not stifle individuals either” (Gellner 1994-1996: 193). The institutions covered by the narrower definition are therefore something that becomes *part of* the civil society in the latter, broader sense. According to Gellner, civil society has become a word denoting a feasible society, almost interchangeable with, but more illuminating than that of democracy (Gellner 1994-1996: 189).

The lack of an agreed upon definition, however, has not obstructed the development of empirical research; regardless of how one defines civil society, it is clear that voluntary, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play central role in a civil society (also referred to as the third sector). In Putnam's (1993) study of the functioning of democracy in Italian regions, the presence of NGOs is one of the criteria used for comparing the strength of the civil society. The attention that Putnam pays to voluntary organizations is primarily motivated by their capability of contributing to social capital, defined as community members' readiness to act collectively in order to achieve common goals (Putnam 1993: 167). There are other reasons to consider the third sector as an integral part of the civil society. Civil society organizations can serve as a channel for participatory democracy because they represent values and interests that are not sufficiently taken into account by traditional institutions of representative democracy. As Habermas (1992/1997) puts it in his description of an ideal deliberative democracy, the organized private interests form an interface between the "life-world" – people's immediate environment and the aspirations that originate from there – and the "systems," where political and economic decisions are made on the basis of formalized rights and obligations.

If we look at the third sector's role from the “systems” point of view, particularly the institutions of public administration, we will also notice that reflections on participatory or deliberative democracy are relevant for the much-discussed transition from "government" to "governance" (Benz and Papadopoulos 2006: 2). Since the 1980s, competing interests and priorities have been incorporated into a system of horizontal networks that cross the boundaries between institutions, sectors and territories. According to the governance theorists, these networks will, to a certain extent, replace the earlier hierarchical, strictly formalized decision-making practices that characterized earlier public authorities. The involvement of NGOs, businesses and experts in administrative decision-making may result in policies that are better able to respond to the society's true needs and expectations. Ultimately, however, our interest in the third sector is prompted by considerations that have little to do with its role within the civil society.

The neo-liberal thinking, that has also affected the governance concept, has emphasized a putative need to reduce and streamline the welfare state's economic functions (Kettl 1997). Public organizations' practice of mimicking operating principles of private businesses has been viewed as a feasible strategy for streamlining governmental operations. As to the welfare services, neo-liberal views resulted in outsourcing the traditionally governmental functions to businesses and non-governmental organizations, when practically and politically feasible. In this context, the NGOs become an (involuntary) aide to a dismantling welfare state. What the decision-makers are focusing on in such situations is not

the value of representation grounded in the needs of citizens, but rather the need to offer a certain amount of pre-defined services in a manner that is both reliable and inexpensive.

The relationship between civil society and the third sector is thus intimate, though not straightforward. This relationship has, however, often been portrayed as more direct. For example, Suvi Salmenniemi (2008) postulates such a relationship in discussing civil society in Eastern Europe and Russia after the fall of Communism. According to her, the dominant way of using these two terms has even been to equate them. She is probably right, especially when it comes to policy oriented research without much theoretical ambition. At the same time, the criticism of such a theoretical "shortcut" has been extensive as well (e.g. Hann 2004; Lagerspetz 2001).

It is the normative aspect inherent in both definitions summed up by Gellner that bridges the gap between the narrower sociological, and the wider political science, meanings of the term: non-governmental institutions of *a proper type* are needed in order to achieve a desirable, more civilized, whole. The question of whether the third sector's continued expansion in the post-communist societies also means a strengthening of the civil society should be answered empirically; the answer cannot be deduced from a definition. The NGOs can contribute to a stronger civil society, but this is not a conclusion to be arrived *a priori*. For instance, the growing importance of NGOs may be simply attributed to the reorganization of governmental functions, which may not necessarily result in improved conditions for civic participation.

THE THIRD SECTOR IN ESTONIA: FROM HISTORY TO MODERNITY

The first NGOs in Estonia were formed during the second half of the 18th century. Following that, in the latter period, associations operating in the Estonian language emerged alongside the previously dominant German-speaking organizations. In the independent republic that was created after the First World War, various NGOs played an important role in public life.

In the early 1930s, the number of registered associations amounted to around 12,000, which corresponds to a rate of 102 inhabitants per one association. In neighboring Finland, the corresponding figures were 18,376 and 187, respectively (Ruutsoo 2002: 75). This may be associated with Timo Toivonen's (1992) finding that during this period and in comparison with Finland, despite its lower GDP per capita, Estonia was a more modernized nation, as measured by non-economic indicators, such as education, share of urban population, and consumption patterns, among other. Konstantin Päts' authoritarian coup in 1934 brought with it an increasing state control over the voluntary sector, for instance, through the top-down creation of national umbrella organizations (Ruutsoo 2002: 76). Estonia's incorporation into the Soviet Union in the summer of 1940, however, abolished freedom of association altogether. Virtually all non-governmental organizations were banned, their property was nationalized, and the leaders were arrested (Ruutsoo 2002: 107).

In the literature, the common designation of totalitarianism is sometimes used to refer to both Nazism and regimes of the Soviet type, especially to the Soviet Union during Stalin's leadership until 1953. The totalitarianism refers to the political leadership's attempts of

controlling the whole society to the smallest detail, including the private spheres of life. Although there were, in fact, large variations in how the regime worked in various socialist countries and during different decades, and although the idea of a total control over society is impossible in principle, the objective was clearly there. The totalitarian regimes made efforts to create a unified society, with no space for divergent values and interests. As Hannah Arendt wrote in her famous treatise (1951: 20),

Equality of condition among their subjects has been one of the foremost concerns of despotisms and tyrannies since ancient times, yet such equalization is not sufficient for totalitarian rule because it leaves more or less intact certain non-political communal bonds between the subjects, such as family ties and common cultural interests. [...] From the point of view of totalitarian rulers, a society devoted to chess for the sake of chess is only in degree different and less dangerous than a class of farmers for the sake of farming. Himmler quite aptly defined the SS member as the new type of man who under no circumstances will ever do “a thing for its own sake... Bolshevik rulers have succeeded in creating an atomized and individualized society the like of which we have never seen before [...]”.

Thus, a total control over society was never achieved in the Soviet Union. It is possible to point out the important role played by informal networks in socialist societies, both in the private sphere of reproduction, and in economic and political decision making (Benda et al 1988; Lagerspetz 2001). Networks of friends and acquaintances were invaluable in order to get access to deficit consumer goods or to circumvent bureaucratic obstacles. A parallel economy, in which state leaders owned production units, emerged as a response to the growing difficulties of planned economy. After Stalin's death in 1953, there was a period of liberalization associated with Khrushchev's period of “thaw.” For Estonia, it meant that some legal opportunities for establishing associations were re-opened.

For example, cultural and hobby organizations, national organizations for nature conservation, and horticulture organizations were very prominent and reached the peak of popularity around 1982 (Saar 1993). Such organizations were explicitly non-political, and often were closely supervised by state authorities. In retrospect, the experience of organizational activity that the participants acquired did, nevertheless, decisively facilitate the emergence of the mass revolutionary movements during 1987-1991. The re-establishment of freedom of association in 1989 was a part of the revolutionary process, even before Estonia's declaration of independence in August of 1991.

Current legislation on non-profit associations (*mittetulundusühendused*) and foundations (*sihtasutused*) came into force in 1996. This legislation is relatively straightforward. There are no specific requirements in the process of legal registration regarding the number of members, the size of a foundation's assets, or the purpose of an organization. Economic activities are allowed, but all paid fees and non-monetary benefits are taxed. Non-profit associations and foundations may be founded by private individuals, public institutions and other organizations alike. The registration and tax authorities do not distinguish between organizations on the basis of founders names, and there is no assessment of whether organizations operate to pursue public interest. Organizations may, however, apply

for the status of a public interest organization. If received, this status grants them tax benefits by way of permitting to pay out tax-free scholarships and receive tax deductible donations. The concept of public interest has no legal definition, and not all organizations that could be considered working in the public interest receive such special treatment.

Due to the lack of public interest definition in this legislation, NGOs are being treated similarly with businesses. Therefore, in most cases there is no need to classify them or to assess whether they contribute to public interest. At the same time, the formal administrative requirements (e.g., monthly reporting for the tax authorities on income and payments) may be difficult to meet for small associations with little regular activity (Hinno, Lagerspetz & Vallimäe 2008), as compared to larger organizations or small businesses.¹

According to the Estonian Business Registration Authority (*Äriregister*), there were 26,000 registered NGOs in 2007, including 800 foundations and about 8,000 housing associations (all registered by the same authority). The number of voluntary associations, i.e. nonprofit organizations with members, was thus roughly 17,000. Of those, one quarter (26.4%) were economically active, while the same goes for around a half (49.2%) of foundations. In a survey conducted in 2005 (Rikmann & al. 2005), the largest group of nonprofit organizations (18%) reported sports as their main activity. While a large number of associations was active in the fields of culture and art, heritage, etc., there was also a considerable number of those focused on advocacy of the interests of professional societies and other groups (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 about here]

National umbrella organizations exist in most fields of activity and more than a third of the associations (37.9%) are members of these umbrella organizations (Hinno & al. 2008). One of them, the Estonian Union of Nonprofit Associations and Foundations (*Eesti mittetulundusühenduste ja sihtasutuste liit*, EUNA) serves as a common organization for training and advocacy for the whole third sector. The Interior Ministry is regularly consulting with this organization about the planning of governmental policies towards NGOs. EUNA closely works with the Open Estonia Foundation funded by the American philanthropist, George Soros. Since late 1980s, Soros has built up a network of foundations in the former Eastern bloc with the mission to promote the development of civil society and the idea of Open Society as he sees it (see, for example, Soros 2006). Additionally, the state-supported foundation Enterprise Estonia (*Ettevõtlike Arendamise Sihtasutus*, EAS) maintains regional advice centers for NGOs.

Although the number of registered organizations has risen sharply, participation in their activities is remaining low, as compared to other European states (see Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

Active participation in trade unions and religious associations is low even in comparison with the Eastern European average. Moreover, in both Estonia and the rest of

¹ In fact, a decision to clear the national registry of inactive associations resulted in the legal termination of more than 3,300 NGOs in 2012, due to the failure to submit annual reports to the taxation authorities (Sundblom & al., forthcoming).

Eastern Europe, the numbers of passive membership are quite low as well. NGO membership has not become a routine part of an ordinary citizen's social networks, as much as it has become, for example, in neighboring Finland or the other Nordic countries. As one might expect, there are strong statistical correlations between membership and such background factors as education, economic status, and ethnic composition. While more than a third of ethnic Estonians (35.1%) reported either active participation or passive membership in one or more types of voluntary associations, the share of involvement among Russian-speakers was merely one fifth (20.7%) (Hinno et al. 2008).

During the 2000s, the third sector's relationships with the state and local authorities became a controversial topic. In a survey of NGOs conducted in 2005, 51 percent of respondents named municipality, and 35 percent – named the state, as one of their main sources of income (Rikmann et al. 2005). Although attitudes of civil servants and politicians toward NGOs have been changing, interviews conducted with both of these groups left no doubt that they still have a hard time imagining any fruitful forms of cooperation between the government and the third sector (Ruutsoo, Rikmann, & Lagerspetz, 2004):

We are playing the game that they're a kind of third sector and we ask their advice [...]. In real life the third sector doesn't function [...]. It's easy for us [civil servants]: we cross the sum out [of the budget] and that's it, there is no third sector any longer. (Interview with a Civil Servant, Tallinn, 2000)²

You see, it's absolutely clear [...] that if you have a hobby or if you want to do something, you'll have to fund it. You can't say that I(.) that we want to have an association because we want to knit socks and now buy us needles and wool. (Interview with a Politician, Tallinn, 2000)

A turning point was when the *Riigikogu*, the Estonian Parliament, in December of 2002 approved a programmatic document on the civil society development (*Eesti kodanikuühiskonna arengukontseptsioon; EKAK*). The document establishes general principles that should serve as a basis for the future development of the relationships between public authorities and NGOs. These principles include transparency of any public funding, giving representatives of interest groups an opportunity to participate in policy-making, and recognizing NGOs' political independence. Although the EKAK is formulated in rather general terms and lacks any proper mechanism of implementation, it has become something that the voluntary organizations can refer to, if necessary, when negotiating with the authorities.

As a consequence, the third sector and its relationships with the government gained greater political legitimacy. In a survey of Estonian civil servants (N = 960) conducted in January of 2006 (Lagerspetz & al 2006),³ 91 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that "the best solutions are reached through consultation with all stakeholders," while the opposite statement, "if many parties participate in decision-making, the result is disorder and the quality of decisions will suffer" was supported only by 8 percent of respondents. At the

² All quotes from interviews are translations from Estonian by the author.

³ For a more recent account of the research, see Mikko Lagerspetz & Erle Rikmann (2009).

same time, 56 percent of civil servants had no personal experience of cooperation with NGOs. Civil servants within local and regional administrations had on average more experience of cooperating with NGOs, as compared to those employed by national ministries and authorities.

To summarize the third sector's position in Estonia today we can, first, note that the number of registered NGOs has increased rapidly and by now reached a relatively high level. Meanwhile, the population's participation in the activities of NGOs has not grown at the same rate. The consequent fragmentation of the sector is balanced by the existence of several umbrella organizations that act as coordinating bodies for the smaller associations. It is, however, difficult to tell how effective or ineffective the cooperation has been. The sector has undoubtedly gained more visibility. On both sides, there is a clear and growing interest in cooperation between the public and the voluntary sectors. However, the exact forms and rules of this cooperation are yet to be developed.

CIVIL SOCIETY HUGGED TO DEATH BY "GOVERNANCE"?

In what follows, I will discuss the examples of the developments outlined above. I will illustrate my arguments with interview data from two research projects carried out in 2005 and 2008. The first one included a questionnaire survey of NGOs sampled in random from national registry data and answered by organizational leaders (N = 606, made up of 541 voluntary associations and 65 foundations). Within the same project, a series of semi-structured individual and group interviews were also concluded – individual interviews with consultants in six government-financed regional support centers for business and CSOs, and group interviews with representatives of a total of forty-one organizations who actively used the consultation services. (A similar large-scale survey has since been conducted two more times (2010 and 2014); see Rikmann et al., 2010 and Rikmann, 2014). The second study that this chapter draws upon was conducted in 2008. It mapped the existing funding mechanisms and formal agreements between NGOs and Estonian ministries and other government agencies. As a part of that study, representatives of eighteen CSOs participated in group interviews about their experiences of cooperating with the government. The first study has been reported by Rikmann and colleagues (2005) and Rikmann (2007), and the second by Praxis/KUAK (2008). The main theme that I will focus on in this chapter is the pressure on the professionalization of NGOs that happens alongside the lack of institutionalized government–NGO cooperation.

It is well-established that politics both in Estonia and in many other parts of Eastern Europe have been heavily influenced by the neo-liberal ideology. For example, the rhetoric of a "lean state" (*õhuke riik*) has become popular among politicians. One can also observe attempts within public administration to incorporate elements from the New Public Management and Governance theories (Randma 2001; Tönnisson 2006). In their cooperation with the third sector, the authorities have at least in part been following the guidelines of these theories by frequently outsourcing a particular service. An example of this cooperation is a project tender, which authorities announce for bidding, and in which NGOs and businesses are encouraged to participate.

To obtain funding, organizations are expected to demonstrate cost efficiency, and to develop project proposals and reports that follow governmental guidelines. Smaller organizations without full-time administrative staff experience many difficulties in living up to these expectations. One respondent in our study, for example, reported:

So far we had dealings with one Ministry, and in the beginning of our project proposals and reports, there seemed to be hard nuts to crack. We visited an informational event but we have really no one who has any training for [project reporting]. ... We don't have a real top expert (*tippspetsialist*), who could deal with it. The first two project proposals and reports, they were sent back, we missed the deadline by several months; and the first report was approved only when we already were supposed to submit the next one. But in general, we have been learning, and the last few times it has gone well. (Group Interview 3, Tallinn 2008)

The dependence on project funding results in additional difficulties. As a rule, funding is granted only for one year at a time, which creates both uncertainty about the future and a need to smoothly guide the organization over periods when no funding is available. Another respondent conveyed:

[...] If we are supposed to work long-term, do we have a partner? Sometimes we kind of have one and sometimes we don't, the partner behaves exactly as it wishes. Today they finance us a little, and then they might do it or might not, and all this cannot really result in any long-term planning. [...] The state lives one year at a time, and that goes for all its functions. (Group Interview 1, Tallinn 2008)

Two other respondents commented on the same dynamic, as follows:

That is to say, the decisions are made fast, we are informed whether we will get funding, but the money, for example, will come no sooner than after three months, and [...] we simply have to borrow money from one project to another. ... [For example], an employee who has a wealthy husband will get three months' salary at one time. I asked her whether she needs some money right away, whether she can wait for three more months, and she said it's okay if she gets her salary afterwards.

Respondent 2: Actually, you are then blatantly breaking the employment contract...

Respondent 1: We're friends, that is. (Group Interview 2, Tallinn, 2008)

As pointed out by Eikenberry and Kluver (2004: 145), project-based funding forces NGOs to redesign their activities in a way that produces measurable results, as required by the donor. In some cases the requirements are not compatible with how the organizations originally understood their mission, as expressed, for instance, by another respondent:

[...] We can say that the government focuses very much on figures, we do that too, but we think that even one is a whopping figure if it means that one person has received help. For us, it plays a role when a person gets help, but I do not think it matters very much for the government. Quite frankly, I believe that the principles, the foundations that we have, and those of the government, do not fit together. We could get all quotas filled and take in all the homeless, no problem. But we care about the people we take in and want them to get a maximum of help. It is not enough that they just come to us; there should be a change in their lives. (Group Interview 3, Tallinn 2008)

GOVERNANCE AND THE CASE OF ESTONIA

Much of what was discussed above can be applicable to large parts of the modern world. There are, however, distinctively Estonian tendencies, which could in part be explained by the country's small size and its communist past.

For example, since Estonia is a small country, it can often be difficult to find people with certain special skills needed to successfully deliver a particular service. Meanwhile, the donor should also be confident that the organization is able to do what it promises. This means that the authorities, in fact, prefer cooperation with partners they already know. Although Estonian legislation generally does not allow entering into long-term formal agreements with specific organizations, individual members of the civil service often create lasting personal networks with leaders of organizations that meet their professional standards. This may result in tailoring project tenders to particular service providers and reduced transparency requirements. As a respondent in our study conveyed:

[...] We have divided between ourselves the supervision of different activities that we have. For example, she [an employee] has regular contact with some NGOs that she turns to when she needs any information or wants to exchange information. [...] [In this particular field of activities], it is also true that the same people, the names of the associations may vary slightly, it is always the same people who are around. It is all about people, not so much about any particular organization. (Interview 2, Ministry of Justice, Tallinn 2008)

The quote above also illustrates another feature that characterizes both the government-NGO cooperation and the NGOs in general, namely, the individual-centeredness. This phenomenon of focusing on individuals has left its mark in the political life of almost all post-socialist countries. As Schöpflin (1993: 274) points out, the communist regime resulted in people losing their confidence in institutions. Public institutions were perceived as representing an alienated power, while the institutionalization of authentic interests and values was blocked. As a response to the lack of trust in institutions, people aspired to create personalized clientelist relationships with individual members of power hierarchies (cf. Putnam 1993). At almost all levels of society, a paternalistic structure was created, led by a local political leader or the leader of a production unit (e.g., a collective farm). Such informal structure acted as an intermediary between the official requirements of productivity and ideological orthodoxy on the one hand, and the subordinate workers' actual possibilities and needs on the other (Nikula 1997: 47). Despite economic and political transformations, paternalism has, at least in part, survived in Estonian organizational and political culture.

Whereas the market orientation emerging in project-based public-private partnerships has a direct effect only on NGOs participating in such partnerships, paternalism can be said to characterize a large part of the whole third sector. That an individual NGO leader has both considerable responsibility and a heavy workload is considered natural. Along with the population's relatively low level of mobilization, an NGO's dependence on an individual leader easily puts the organization at risk of prolonged inactivity or even closure. Smaller organizations in particular have experienced 'ebbs and tides,' which their members explain by referencing leaders' activities and personal qualities. A participant in our study characterized such 'ebbs and tides' as follows:

During the first years we were led by a young guy who worked with computers, he taught schoolchildren and even the older generation how to handle a computer. But the computer broke and that was the end of our cooperation, and the association's activities ceased. For a few years, the organization existed only on paper. (Group interview with an NGO, Saaremaa 2005)

NGO activities also can become paralyzed when the leader is active but unable to cooperate with other members. Another respondent reported about such leadership dynamics:

This person had such a way to socialize, that, well [pause] everybody do as I say, that was the motto. And as a result, all active members eventually left the association. These days, when I merely mention [that they could start participating in the activities again], many of them really just say: ‘No-no-no, I do not even want to think about it’ [...] (Group interview with an NGO, Harjumaa 2005)

Such dependence on an individual leader is not only problematic from the point of view of internal organizational citizenship, but it also greatly affects the organization's future perspectives. While many association activists are aware of the situation, they find it difficult to see any solutions. Additionally, NGO leaders tend to experience burn outs in trying to recruit volunteers for their events, as conveyed by our study participants:

During the year 2000, we celebrated the [...] anniversary of the village. It was also the last really big event. This year there will be a village convention again.

Interviewer: In between these times, do you run out of energy?

Respondent: Yes. It's hard to say really. In fact, we have twelve members in the club. But those who are active, those who actually come and do the job, they are four or five. In short, if you have to go and visit people at their homes and try to talk engage them all the time, practically nagging them to death, well, sooner or later you run out of motivation. Why bother? (Group interview with an NGO, Saaremaa 2005)

Although professionalization is a new trend in the development of the Estonian associations, one can say that it reinforces the tendency of paternalism that already existed before, as a legacy of Soviet social structures.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the analysis in this article shows, voluntary organizations hold an intermediary position between the ‘life-world’ – the expectations and needs derived from the members' everyday experiences, and the ‘systems world’ of public policy-making and policy implementation. While such a position requires the authorities to recognize associations as partners, the third sector also needs to safeguard its independence and openness to the grassroots rather than top-down initiatives. Professionalism is, of course, important for organizational legitimacy. However, if its ambition is not merely to implement a policy decided upon by others, but also to influence it, an organization needs to be able to rely on independent funding sources. This is what Tocqueville had in mind when he wrote about voluntary associations as independent centers of power, as “a powerful and enlightened member of the community, which cannot be disposed of at pleasure, or oppressed without

remonstrance; and which, by defending its own rights against the encroachments of the government, saves the common liberties of the country.” (Tocqueville 1840-1847: 345)

The primary resource that a voluntary association can hope to possess consists of its members. From the normative point of view about civil society, it is problematic when the NGOs' growing professionalism is not accompanied by an equally strong development of their ability to mobilize members and supporters. Instead of seeing the growth of the third sector in Eastern Europe as an upsurge of civic activity, as it has often been portrayed in scholarship, one can also see it as an example of colonization of the ‘life-world’ by the ‘systems-world’ (Habermas 1981-1987).

Winds of change are blowing everywhere, and much of what was described here applies to other countries outside of Estonia and Eastern Europe. But as Apostolis Papakostas (2003: 17) writes, a breeze is always "felt more strongly in clearings and sparse forests than in dense ones." The wind of NGO development now seems to blow towards further professionalization, market orientation, and leadership centeredness. These tendencies are, perhaps, less noticeable in societies which, like Finland and the other Nordic countries, have long been possessing extensive numbers of well-established NGOs with deep roots in people's habitual activities. At the same time, NGOs in the former socialist countries are forced to defend themselves against a development, which in its market fundamentalism, is no less totalizing than the system from which they managed to free themselves twenty years ago.

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Figure 1. Voluntary Associations by Main Activity, 2004-2005, % (N = 606) (Rikmann & al. 2005)



Sports
 Culture and the arts
 Advocacy
 Professional union
 Several equally important
 Welfare services
 Leisure
 Education and research
 Traditions
 Local community
 Nature conservation
 Health
 Other activities
 Agriculture
 Hunting and fishing
 Social development
 Religion
 Heritage preservation

Table 1. Participation in Various Types of Voluntary Associations in Estonia and in other European Countries (see Lagerspetz et al 2008 for Estonia; ISSP 2004 for other countries cited in Hinno et al. 2008).

		Estonia (2007)	Finland (2004)	Latvia (2004)	Western Europe, average (2004)	Eastern Europe, average (2004)
Political party	<i>active participation</i>	1.8%	1.6%	0.9%	2.6%	2.0%
	<i>only membership</i>	3.2%	7.9%	1.1%	6.8%	2.5%
Trade union	<i>active participation</i>	1.6%	6.0%	4.0%	8.1%	4.4%
	<i>only membership</i>	3.3%	49.9%	9.9%	25.5%	9.0%
Church or religious organization	<i>active participation</i>	3.0%	7.2%	8.7%	14.5%	10.7%
	<i>only membership</i>	7.4%	61.0%	25.9%	32.4%	19.5%
Association for sports, leisure, or culture	<i>active participation</i>	9.3%	22.5%	13.2%	27.6%	10.4%
	<i>only membership</i>	2.9%	17.2%	6.2%	12.5%	5.7%
Other voluntary association	<i>active participation</i>	3.9%	15.7%	6.1%	14.4%	5.7%
	<i>only membership</i>	2.5%	20.3%	4.2%	9.5%	4.0%

Share of active and passive members among respondents of working age. The Eastern European countries that participated in the ISSP 2004 included Latvia, Poland, East Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary and Bulgaria. The Western European countries included the 15 old EU member countries (except East Germany), Norway and Switzerland.