

The State and the Civil Society in Macedonia – friends of convenience?

Either due to the ‘Westernization of the Balkans’, the challenge of fulfilling European Union’s conditionality for accession, or the natural change in mentality after 20 years of democratic transformation, the ‘civil society’ became lately one of the ‘hot topics’ in the Balkans. Its importance was further emphasized due to the European Year of Volunteering (2011). Implicitly, the public sector, as well as the business sector, started to show more willingness to cooperate with the civil sector in many fields previously ‘out of reach’ for the majority of civil society organizations (CSOs). No matter what the factors for this change were, in the end it is important that they led to some visible positive transformations regarding the role of the civil society.

In 2007 the Macedonian Government adopted the “Strategy for Cooperation of the Government with the Civil Sector” together with a four-year Action Plan. Beside the fact that the Action Plan is considered a plus for Macedonia in comparison with other countries from the Western Balkans, its drafting was mostly due to the pressure of the international actors rather than to a strong social activism. Some of the shortcomings of the Action Plan include the fact that it is too ambitious and unrealistic considering the limited time period for its implementation and the low level of cooperation between the Government and the civil sector. In addition, although the Strategy contains seven main goals, concerning for example the inter-sector cooperation and the participation of the civil society organizations in the decision-making process, it does not provide any concrete mechanisms for their implementation. Moreover, the work of the Unit for Cooperation with the NGOs (the department under the General Secretariat in charge of the implementation of the national Strategy) is rather inefficient and inflexible because of its dependant status within the government’s structure. Thus, the full implementation of the Strategy became a real challenge, or better said a ‘mission impossible’.

In addition, at the local level Macedonia has some good examples of strategies for cooperation with the civil sector, such as the City of Skopje (Strategy for Cooperation with Civil Society Organizations) and the Municipality of Karpos (Strategic Action Plan for Cooperation). By the end of this year, three more municipalities in Macedonia will be involved in a pilot project for creating their own ‘tailor made’ local strategy for cooperation with the civil sector: Bitola, Debar and Jegunovce.

However, even after these strategies have been adopted and implemented, there is still no system of central involvement of the civil society organizations in the processes of policy/decision-making. The next steps that must be taken are to create institutional frameworks both at the local and national level. This can be done for example by drafting a clear follow up mechanisms stating how the opinions of the civil society will be included in the decision-making process and by creating a national data base administrated by the Government, where the CSOs can register and which will enable them to be informed about the public body’s activities and plans in first hand and on time.

What is it that makes this ‘state – civil society relationship’ so difficult in comparison to the EU countries? Is it the legacy of an authoritarian regime that led to a lack of political will to involve the civil society at the top level or is it actually the lack of a civil society culture that makes the civil sector a weak actor, easy to be ignored? At this moment, this cooperation in Macedonia resembles a marriage between the State and the civil sector arranged by the international actors such as the EU, OSCE and UN, where the two are rather forced to ‘live’ together without actually knowing each other. The perception is that they are both reluctant to work together and they criticize the working style of the other. Also, their cooperation is something irregular and ad-hoc, depending on their needs: for example if the State has a deficit of human resources or know-how in a certain field, or if the civil society organizations have a lack of financial resources to fund their activities.

That is why the international community is actively getting involved in the process of developing and strengthening the cooperation between the public, civil and business sector. The implementation of the Strategy for Cooperation of the Government with the Civil Sector ended in May this year, and since then the EU is offering support to the Unit for Cooperation with the NGOs through the Technical Assistance project. The technical assistance will include a revision of the national Strategy for cooperation, based upon consultations with the civil society and the government administration.

Having all this in mind, it is uncertain how the future relationship between the civil sector and the State and its institutions will develop. Until we know the answer to that, what remains to be done in the upcoming days is to be seen how the revised version of the national Strategy will look like and if the shortcoming registered in the previous one will be improved this time.

*Written by Irina Lepadatu – Residential intern in Analytica
ilepadatu@analyticamk.org*