

CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIAN COUNTRIES

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Civil Society and Democracy in Former Yugoslavian Countries

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This project addresses the impact of civil society on the quality of democracies in former Yugoslavian countries. Many of these new republics have witnessed some degree of democratic backsliding in the last twenty years. However, current comparative politics research has pointed to the presence of a strong civil society as a potential preventative mechanism for returns to authoritarian norms. This paper uses the Varieties of Democracy dataset to quantitatively test the correlative relationship between civil society and democratic backsliding in former Yugoslavian countries. We allude to larger research questions and the need for more quantitative explorations of these topics in comparative politics.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly, the term “civil society” refers to all voluntary associations. This can include but is not limited to, participation in social movements, politics, business, church, extra-curricular activities, Boy Scouts, and even bowling leagues.

The early nineties saw an emergence of the most notable works in the civil society subfield, particularly Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*. This work described the declining state of American civil society and posited a link between a strong civil society and macro development goals such as democratization. Putnam also claimed that social capital, measured by civil society programs, connected collective action and economic development (1995).

After Putnam, other studies attempted to connect the size of civil societies in a country to its level of democracy and economic well-being. In current scholarly literature, a strong civil society is seen as inseparable from a strong democracy. These findings were used by western countries and the UN as a reason to invest heavily in supporting and propping up NGOs in developing countries to support development outcomes (Scholte 2002; Shelley 1997).

Since Putnam, many scholars started challenging the legitimacy and strength of the tie between civil society and democracy, calling civil society a double-edged sword that can both help and hurt democracy (Foley and Edwards 1996). Others show that it is the quality of a civil society that matters more than the sheer number of NGOs or other organizations (Woolcock 2011; Cohen and Arato 1997; Shelley 1997). Scholars such as Francis Fukuyama and Jan Scholte argue that other metrics, such as trust and representativeness, are the most important when looking at how civil society shapes democratization and economic development

(Fukuyama 1995; Scholte 2002). Here, democratic outcomes of civil society balance of views, external and internal checks, individual attachments, and the distribution of attachments all serve as model indicators for “positive” democratic outcomes (Warren 2011).

Cases of transition from autocracy to democracy can often be filled with perils of democratic backsliding and authoritarian return. After the cold war, many nations experienced abrupt regime change, transitioning from communist regimes to fledgling democratic governments. After these democratic transitions, many countries were thought to be moving towards stable democracy. But while some nations became full-fledged democracies, most become ruled by hybrid regimes (Levitsky and Way 2002). Many of these hybrid regimes have been coined “competitive authoritarian regimes,” or regimes with formal democratic institutions that are abused by a single party or government. To explain these varying levels of democratization in each state, Levitsky and Way came up with a theory of leverage and linkage.

The theorists define leverage as an “authoritarian governments’ vulnerability to external democratizing pressure” (Levitsky and Way 2005, 21). There are three main factors behind this vulnerability: state size, military presence, and economic strength; competing foreign policy agendas; and linkage to an alternative power. The more leverage Western powers have over a state, the more costly it is for that state to pursue authoritarian policies. However, Levitsky and Way show that this leverage is a blunt tool that did not allow for nuanced and lasting policy change.

Most democratic transitions do not occur due to massive mobilization efforts. Rather, as seen in many of the Eastern Europe democratic transitions, they often occur after a period of prolonged negotiation (Diamond 1994). While civil society was not the sole cause of democratization efforts in these countries, it had a crucial impact on their respective regime

transitions. Civil society acts a check on state power and authority and can act as a legitimizing factor for democracy by enabling and elevating minority groups and giving them a voice that they might not have previously had in the political sphere. For civil society to aid democratization, organizations must have open methods and democratic goals.

Institutionalization, democratic character, pluralism (without fracturing), and denseness are all additional factors that lead civil society to have an impact on democratic outcomes in a state. All these factors serve to offer citizens choice and representation within civil society. However, there are limits to the ability of civil society acting as a democratizing force.

Because of such limits, scholars such as Nancy Bermeo and Marcus Mietzner have started to look at civil society as a defensive force, rather than an offensive one. That is, instead of looking at the ability of civil society to spur a democratic transition, they have begun to look at the ability of civil society to help maintain democracy in places where it already exists. Nancy Bermeo shows the ability of civil society to enable counter mobilization efforts against democratic backsliding (2016). Bermeo uses Latin American examples in her paper, showing how recent mass counter-mobilizations paired with changed economic conditions have allowed for reversals to democratic backsliding in Venezuela and Ecuador.

This reversing of authoritarian norms can also be seen in Indonesia. Looking at the stagnating democratic consolidation of Indonesia, Marcus Mietzner shows the role civil society may play in safeguarding democracy (Mietzner 2012). Indonesia was once considered to be an exception to the “democratic recession” of the late 2000s by academics but has since started to backslide. He posits that Indonesian civil society has been successful in resisting additional elite led democratic backsliding. When elites tried to take control and push for anti-democratic measures, civil society groups and the media were outraged (Mietzner 2012). NGOs used experts

to argue against the autocratic reforms and their potential democratic erasure. Some NGOs organized leaflets and led public campaigns against the reforms. The media also argued against the reforms and used opinion polls to amplify the complaints of the citizenry, clearly demonstrating the defensive capability of Indonesian civil society.

This project seeks to address the impact of civil society on the quality of democracies in post-communist Eastern Europe. Recently, many of these countries have witnessed some degree of democratic backsliding. However, the presence of a strong civil society may help prevent new backsliding and allow for countermobilization and pushback against the backsliding that has already occurred. This paper will be looking directly at the relationship between civil society and democratic backsliding in post-communist Eastern Europe in order to test the defensive and stabilizing capacities of civil society. If this theory holds, then there should be increasing levels of liberal democracy detected alongside higher levels of civil society participation.

CHAPTER II

METHODS

This project analyzes the effect of civil society strength on democratic outcomes. Both the level of liberal democracy and the level of civil society participation will be studied in order to quantitatively test the theory that civil society can limit democratic backsliding. In order to test this hypothesis, specifically, that decreasing levels of democratic backsliding will occur among countries with stronger, more active civil societies, I make use of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset. The V-Dem dataset is a multidimensional and disaggregated dataset that uses measures beyond electoral presence in order to measure democracy (Coppedge et al. 2016). The dataset has five different democratic indices, each of which reflect a different aspect of democracy. The democratic indices are: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian. This project looks at the liberal democracy index, which measures the limits placed on government power as well as the protection of individual and minority rights from state infringement. This is measured by the level of electoral democracy, as well as legal minority rights protections, judicial constraints on the executive, and legislative constraints on the executive (Coppedge et al. 2016).

As with the democratic indices the second variable in this project utilizes the V-Dem dataset, this time employing the Civil Society Participation Index. This index seeks to “provide a measure of a robust civil society, understood as one that enjoys autonomy from the state and in which citizens freely and actively pursue their political and civic goals, however conceived.” (Coppedge et al. 2016). This is measured by aggregating local and national candidate selection, civil society organization consultation, civil society participatory environment, and women’s

participation in civil society. This project will compare these two indices in order to quantitatively measure the effect of civil society participation on democratic outcomes.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the classification system and values for given V-Dem civil society and liberal democracy indices. The different classification ranges are derived from the 0-1 scale the indices are based off as well as the average values of sample countries. The values themselves are based on the average of each index over a given time period.

Table 1. Classification values for indices.

Classification	Civil Society Participation Index	Liberal Democracy Index
High	>0.75	>0.75
Medium High	0.60-0.75	0.60-0.75
Medium	0.40-0.60	0.40-0.60
Medium Low	0.25-0.40	0.25-0.40
Low	<0.25	<0.25

The two tables below show the resulting classifications for Eastern European countries over two time periods. The first shows Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, and Macedonia from 1995-2005. Albania officially emerged from Communism in 1992, when it held its first democratic elections. Croatia and Macedonia left Yugoslavia in 2001, with Bosnia following soon after in 2002.

Table 2. Explaining variation in democratic outcomes according to civil society strength in Eastern Europe from 1995-2005.

Country	Civil Society Participation	Liberal Democracy
Macedonia	Medium	Medium
Albania	Medium	Medium Low
Bosnia	Medium	Low
Croatia	Medium High	Medium Low

Looking at *Table 2*, it is difficult to draw a strong conclusion on the relationship between civil society participation and liberal democracy. Macedonia shows a strong correlation between its liberal democracy and civil society participation, given the fact that both variables averaged the same “Medium” rating over the course of the ten-year period. Albania is less conclusive, with liberal democracy trailing the level of civil society participation by a single rank. Meanwhile, Bosnia and Croatia both have a liberal democracy classification two levels below that of their civil society participation.

It is worth noting the relatively chaotic circumstances surrounding these countries during this period of classification. In 1995, Bosnia was engulfed in the Bosnian War, which did not end until the ceasefire on December 14 of that same year. Additionally, many of these countries were within the first few years of their democracies in 1995 and were only just starting to develop their governing institutions. Furthermore, as ex-communist countries, organized civil society was also a new development. Under communism, many organizations and groups were either forcefully limited in their scope and actions or downright banned from existence. This chaos can help explain why both the civil society and liberal democracy classification from 1995-2005 are lower compared to the ones from 2005-2015.

Future researchers might find it advisable to limit their consideration to 2005 and beyond. Before 2005, many eastern European countries were extremely unstable with wars and internal political unrest dominating their socio-political landscape. By limiting the study to only 2005 and onwards, this period of unrest could be avoided, and there would be a greater chance of isolating the two variables being studied.

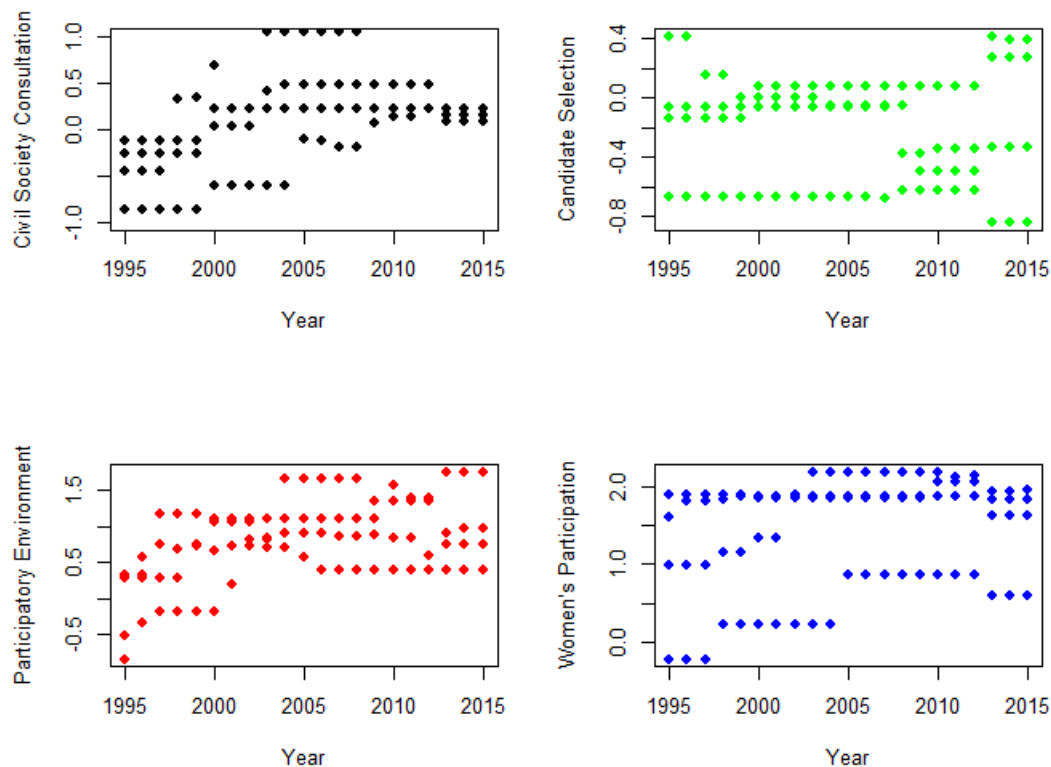
The next table shows classifications for Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, and Macedonia, in addition to Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia. Given the official statuses of the countries, data for Serbia and Montenegro starts in 2006, and Kosovo in 2008.

Table 3. Explaining variation in democratic outcomes according to civil society strength in Eastern Europe from 2005-2015.

Country	Civil Society Participation	Liberal Democracy
Croatia	High	Medium High
Albania	Medium High	Medium
Serbia	Medium High	Medium
Kosovo	Medium	Medium Low
Bosnia	Medium High	Medium Low
Macedonia	Medium High	Medium Low
Montenegro	High	Medium Low

Table 3 also fails to provide a clear picture as to the relationship between civil society and liberal democracy. Albania, Croatia, Kosovo, and Serbia all have a liberal democracy classification only one level below that of their civil society participation. Bosnia and Macedonia have two ranks between their civil society participation and liberal democracy classifications. Montenegro is the only country to have a difference in three ranks, with a “High” civil society participation score and a “Medium Low” liberal democracy score.

From the table, the two variables appear to have a very slight correlation, in that higher levels of civil society tend to correlate with higher levels of liberal democracy. However, this correlation is too weak to draw any substantiated conclusion from. Instead, the civil society index was broken down into sub-indices in order to gain a clearer picture of any potential causal mechanisms. The four civil society sub-indices are candidate selection, civil society organization consultation, civil society organization participatory environment, and women's participation in civil society organizations. The results for the index breakdown are shown in *Graph 1* below.



Graph 1. Civil society sub-indices from 1995-2015.

Of the four sub-indices for civil society, the civil society participatory environment showed the highest averaged correlation with liberal democracy while candidate selection averaged the lowest. The civil society participatory environment measures the extent to which

civil society organizations can function independently from the government, as well as how high voluntary and popular participation is amongst citizens. Candidate selection measures how centralized legislative candidate selection is within parties. The sub-index looks at whether candidate selection is done at the local, state, or national party level. The breakdown for these high and low civil society sub-index correlations with liberal democracy are found in the *Table 4* below. Listed are the country values for each of the sub-indices. The values are averaged over a 20 year range from 1995-2015.

Table 4. Civil Society sub-index correlations with liberal democracy 1995-2015.

Country	Civil Society Participatory Environment (Highest)	Candidate Selection (Lowest)
Serbia	0.91	0.09
Kosovo	0.77	-0.60
Albania	0.72	-0.70
Croatia	0.64	0.84
Bosnia	0.56	0.18
Macedonia	0.12	0.53
Montenegro	NA	NA

The sub-indices for Montenegro are not available. This table shows the generally high correlation between civil society participatory environment and liberal democracy, and the generally low correlation between candidate selection and liberal democracy. This table shows that it is possible for certain aspects of civil society to effect democracy more than others. So, while the main civil society index did not show significant correlation, it is possible that it is instead the civil society participatory environment that matters more than some of the other sub-

indices in promoting and maintaining liberal democracy.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In this study, I attempted to quantitatively determine the effects of civil society participation on democratization. By making use of the V-dem dataset, I determined the correlation between democratization and civil society indices for multiple Eastern European countries. Based on the results, my analysis fails to confirm the experimental hypothesis with any predetermined degree of certainty. This means that after the tabular analysis there was not enough data to support the hypothesis that higher degrees of civil society participation lead to higher levels of liberal democracy. Looking at the sub-indices for civil society yields a slightly clearer picture of the effects. In particular, the comparison of these correlation coefficients shows that the only significant result indicated a slight positive relationship between the civil society participatory environment and liberal democracy. The civil society participatory environment shows the level to which civil society organizations function independently and have popular participation. This relationship could be potentially caused by the ability of such organizations to hold the government accountable with their own version of a popular mandate via their membership. It could also be due to the organizational capacity of such organizations to mobilize in the event of an action against democratic norms.

There are some limitations of this study that need to be addressed. To increase the predictive capabilities of this study, more controls for the economic and political conditions of the studied Eastern European countries are needed. Additionally, methodological concerns limit the quantitative scope of my investigation. Both the studied countries and the considered time period could be expanded or contracted in order to yield more definitive results. In addition,

building a valid multivariate logistic regression model, which considers some combination of the civil society indices, could be more useful than analyzing each individually, especially when trying to isolate which sub-indices of civil society participation are most important in predicting democratic outcomes.

As partially mentioned above, there are multiple extensions to this project that could lead to more definitive results. Expanding the project to both other Eastern European countries and former USSR states outside of Eastern Europe would allow for more a more extensive quantitative study. This extension would be particularly relevant, as many of these states developed democratic institutions at similar times to the Eastern European countries already covered in this study. Comparing and analyzing civil society and democratization indices of South American countries could also prove insightful as many Latin and South American countries also face the issue of democratic backsliding.

Interpreting the results as a rebuke of the democratic institutionalizing capabilities of civil society is unadvisable. Much of the current literature in the field of comparative politics supports models of civil society as a stabilizing factor for young democracies. However, this article shows that this relationship might not be true in the case in former Yugoslavian countries. This study is a good starting point for developing more quantitative models to better test these relationships.

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