

CIVIC

Prejudice fair

By: Daliborka Uljarević

Everything that NGOs are doing is a form of political action since NGOs are political phenomenon too.

In the context of the tenth anniversary of the Centre for Civic Education (CCE), as well as the continuous dedication of many colleagues, I believe that it is important to recall certain aspects of the environment in which non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are operating in Montenegro. NGOs have become an inevitable part of the process of state formation based on the rule of law, respect for diversity and the improvement of civil liberties. However, still there are present numerous biases, speculations, malicious constructions and improper generalizations of the NGO sector. The lack of cherished culture of critical deliberation or at least existence of argumentative discourse, as well as distinct preference to connotation as the learning principle, are all the challenges that we have to tackle, alongside the ongoing activities. It is not surprising, but not also justified, that the decision makers - those standing on the hill from which the view spreads further - intentionally or unconsciously commit mistakes which entail severe consequences. Detecting crucial prejudices that exist and are being amplified against non-governmental organisations (NGOs) does not imply their automatic removal, but surely it is step forward in understanding the real nature of the NGOs, especially in the context of the existing constellation of forces in society.

Civil society and non-governmental organisations are synonymous. NGOs are a part of the civil society which, according to the methodology developed by CIVICUS, contains another 19 elements! Even if we try to apply broader categories, we still need to acknowledge that the civil society is also represented through religious communities, trade unions, media, professional associations, foundations, social movements, etc. The perception which identifies NGOs with civil society perhaps indicates their real contribution to the establishment of principles of an open civic society and a healthy balance of powers, but it also points at worryingly low levels of social activism, potential and initiative in other categories of the civil society.

NGOs are irresponsible and incompetent. Certainly no more than other sectors of the society, just the opposite! But under a continuous and unjustly heavy burden of great expectations! NGOs cannot replace the non-functioning of the system, the lack of any valid value framework, nor can they solve social dissatisfaction. They can work to improve the situation, contribute to the implementation of certain standards and principles, empower citizens to take stock of their rights and understand the ways they can fight for them, they can provide active, constructive response to the challenges facing the Montenegrin society, monitor the work of decision-makers and cooperate with them on a healthy basis. Montenegro has no tradition of NGOs, which makes the situation even more difficult. However, the times are changing quickly, and the key asset of NGOs are its people, serious, young, highly educated, hard working, energetic, creative, with advantages of advanced computer literacy, knowledge of English, French, Italian... professionals with courage to think independently. Exactly flexibility of NGOs and human resources are a progressive force that should not be underestimated, because it gives weight to social events and influences dominant power projects becoming subject of problem-solving, for the common good. Finally, responsibility and competence of NGOs is best judged by those who benefit from our services, by associates, by the participants in our programmes, by donors – and the passing grade with that jury depends solely upon the achievements.

NGOs “sell fog” and get their money for nothing. The work done by the numerous colleagues in NGO sector is rarely as obvious and self-evident as, say, a local culture road, a monument or a pool... It does not mean that NGO achievements are less worthy, that this work is devoid of dedication and monumental efforts, and that it does not result in social changes. Just think of Tara, elimination of military obligation,

introduction of Civic Education in formal education programmes, progressive laws, protection of a number of individual human rights, etc. and the role the NGOs have played in all these. Diverse, developed programmes of alternative education implemented by NGOs constitute a significant contribution to the quality and democratisation of the Montenegrin society on its road towards EU, and they also serve to draw into the focus certain topics of universal importance and to encourage citizens to engage in individual action. Everybody in their own sphere, in their own way, but things are definitely happening. The issue of quality of NGOs and their services, professionalism of their activists, the justification of their existence and the manner in which they spend the money is clearly defined by rules and by the market where at which we are all acting, and where someone is more, and someone less successful in realisation of his/her ideas and survival. There is nothing foggy about it! In other words, those only rhetorically struggling for their aims, as government for the reforms, will not pass that test and they can be kept alive only by the same government, but not for very long.

The NGO sector is a “jungle”. Those who are looking for a phone number of the NGO sector and a single voice to answer them show ignorance of the essence of origin of the NGOs. It is not a state, nor an army, a political party or a single corporation. There will never be a single number, or a president of the Montenegrin NGOs, there will never be a unified opinion on something, because we speak so many different languages! Perhaps there will be an agreement to a great extent on certain issues, significant support for certain actions or a common stance of a number of NGOs... This is the beauty of the NGOs sector, this diversity and openness where everybody is welcome, where people gather around a certain vision and work towards the fulfilment of some mission they agreed upon... Our differences result in different intentions, different ways of associating and different methods of achieving goals. Of course, that for those with authoritarian outlook such concept may be beyond reach of understanding, but they will have to get used to it and I hope that in accepting that knowledge they will be encouraged to becoming more tolerant, both in their private lives and in their professional engagements.

NGOs should stay out of politics. The last, but certainly the most dangerous prejudice that leaves a deep negative trace. It is mostly promoted by those who believe that the political parties, the Government, or they personally have been sent from the heavens to conduct politics, while everybody else is there for purely socially ornamental purposes. It seems that we need a reminder to tell us that politics is “an activity by which people create, maintain and change the general principles by which they live” (Andrew Heywood), that it is complex activity but not “dirty” (although our reality has provided ample justification for the use of this adjective!), that it has ceased long ago to be the exclusive playground for politicians, that all people are “political animals” (Aristotle), or social beings and that all that NGOs do is a form of political activism, because NGOs themselves are a political phenomenon. They are sometimes more and sometimes less in tune with the interests of other social actors, but their political and the potential to mobilise, their authentic political activism, is an inseparable prerogative of all NGOs wishing to contribute to the process of democratisation and to the all so necessary improvement of the level of political culture.

Naturally, the list does not stop here. The aim of this outline of basic prejudices against NGOs – those stumbling-stones in understanding civil society are induced by frequent, fallacious and never harmless interpretations bordering the unjust conviction, and are aimed at provoking a well-founded and expert discussion.

The author is executive director of Centre for Civic Education (CCE)