

**DEMOCRACY THAT DELIVERS:
UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF TRANSITION**

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The Role of Civil Society as an Agent of Demand-Driven Social Change

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Title of my talk and title of conference contain some loaded terms that are understood in very different ways by governments and civil society.

I want to start with some definitions.

First, democracy.

Democracy: is now an especially loaded term. In some places democracy is seen to be accompanied by chaos, instability, economic deprivation and poverty. Democracy can even generate fear – that will be imposed by force with US troops.

For us today, I'd like to strip democracy back to what I consider its true meaning: simply the voice of the people, or, in more practical terms, political choice.

This definition removes one common criticism of democracy, criticism coming usually from autocratic governments, that “the people aren't ready for democracy.”

I contend that it is the very rare person who does not take an interest -- at some level -- in what happens to them. And when a person takes an interest in what happens to them, he or she also wants to help determine what happens to them – through exercising opinion in the form of expressing a choice.

It also removes the complaint that democracy somehow must be the American version of it. That when the US promotes democracy it is promoting the form of democracy that exists in the US.

No. Democracy simply means that people have an interest in – and a right to – making choices about how they live, to choose who among them will decide on the laws that govern them, to decide which economic system is best for them, to decide how much revenue the government may collect, and how those monies are to be used for schools, health and social services, public safety, national security.

Second: Civil society.

Civil society is most commonly thought of as simply non-governmental organizations. Certainly NGO's are an important part of civil society, but they are not all there is.

I argue that civil society is the full extent of society, including the government. I argue that "civil society" is a term that should be used to connote the collection of groups that have a say in how a society is governed.

This includes parliament, political parties, the opposition. It includes the media, community groups, women's associations, PTA's, teachers unions and business organizations. It includes charities, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions and self-help groups. It includes public safety officials, law enforcement, judges and election officials. It includes the government in the sense that government is, after all, all the people who serve in government jobs, whether appointed, elected or selected on a merit system.

What do all these groups have in common? Why were they formed? To do something in the interest of the group.

For me, civil society is the result of the ability to come together for collective action.

Third: Transition. Transition sounds like a calm and gradual shift of some kind.

But any transition brings change -- by definition. Change is sometimes welcomed: in the U.S. election campaign underway now, each of the candidates has scrambled hard to be seen as the "candidate for change."

Change – here – is taken as positive, as refreshing and energizing.

Change is not always exhilarating. Not everyone sees change something new and better.

It can be quite scary. Change brings the unknown and unknowable.

It can reduce one's position, one's standing in the community, one's financial situation. It can reduce or eliminate political or economic advantage.

Change – or transitions – a key word of this conference – can have the varied effects I've mentioned. But transitions come in all varieties also, especially in the political and economic world.

Ukraine's Orange Revolution, Georgia's Rose Revolution were both dramatic examples of the citizens deciding for themselves that they would not tolerate election fraud. They refused to accept government manipulation of voting results – and forced the sitting government to leave office and to turn over the reins of power to the properly elected party.

Less dramatic, but no less an important transition -- was the death of President Haidar Aliyev in Azerbaijan and the election a few months later of his son.

The transition of Russia and all of the former Soviet republics from command to market economies was a monumental transition, one very well appreciated by Bulgaria and other countries once behind the Iron Curtain.

The Balkans have seen every manner of transition as well.

Germany's transition from Schroeder to Merkel, France's transition from Chirac to Sarkozy, the UK's from Blair to Brown, Russia's from Putin to Medvedev/Putin are interesting, if not as dramatic as some of the other transitions.

The point is: transitions are standard. They are routine. They are expected. They are predictable in the sense that they are absolutely inevitable.

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So if change – transition – is inevitable, how does civil society harness this to produce the social change that is in the interest of its membership?

How does civil society assure that it can act as an agent for demand-driven social change?

If it is the ability to come together for collective action, who decides what that action should be and to what end? For what goals?

Some agents for change are inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Some are energized by their constitutions, or those of stable democracies. Some refer to principles of various international or regional organizations, such as the principles of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe, in particular its arm that is focused on Democracy and International Human Rights.

Civil society takes it upon itself to define the goals it wishes to work toward – and how to do so.

Civil society – the organizations and groups that it consists of - provides citizens a vehicle for getting involved in policy debates.

Policy debates are always interesting, but the most effective ones are those that result in decisions to act – decisions to do something, to advocate for improvements, to press for change.

It is through advocacy efforts of civil society that individuals can have a voice in formulating public policy, enhancing citizen oversight of public institutions, and

improving public dialogue. These organizations often act as champions for issues not in the mainstream or for issues that are even controversial.

Civil society has contributed to democratization through advocacy efforts in support of democratic reforms.

Many civil society organizations take on controversial issues such as women's rights, ferret out government corruption, and serve as watchdogs. Their presence and activities help assure that government and citizens comply with the rule of law.

Civil society groups, often NGOs, contribute to democratization through nonpartisan election monitoring. International election monitors are important, but in the long run strong, independent nonpartisan organizations are key to free and fair elections.

Examples of effective election monitoring efforts: Golos in Russia, Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections and Civil Rights, Pro-Democracy Association (PDA) in Romania.

NGOs and other civil society organizations can also benefit governments directly by providing social services that governments cannot.

In some cases, states have contracted with NGOs for delivery of social services, because NGOs can deliver them more effectively and more cheaply than the state can.

Letting citizens assume responsibility for managing their own affairs, such as condo associations, so government doesn't continue to have responsibility for providing services. Water users associations, particularly in Central Asia, is a good example of citizens assuming responsibilities for services and resources formerly controlled by governments.

Whether this results in wheel chair ramps in Uzbekistan, a Water Users Association in Armenia, a Drivers' Association in the Russian Far East or a literacy effort in American jails – citizens will organize themselves to press government for change or to take charge of issues that governments can't or won't handle.

There must be an environment that permits this kind of action. That should be the first line goal of civil society -- and of any government responsive to the people -- that is, any democracy.

NGO's and other civil society groups serve as intermediaries between government and general citizenry – this gives the government “someone to talk to” on issues.

This helps government understand issues and pressure points and gives citizens an outlet – the sense that they have a voice on issues that affect them.

Community and local government partnerships have helped identify and prioritize as well as address community needs. Civic involvement has made lives better for residents and contributed to stability.

Civil society groups take responsibility, in other words, to work for agreed change.

Responsibility. This is a key word in civil society's collective action. It is a key word in any democracy. Regrettably, it is a word that is very seldom used in these connections. It has gotten lost in all the emphasis on promoting democracy. This results in some of the most serious misunderstandings of democracy, both on the part of those who wish to practice democracy and governments that oppose it.

Too often democracy is equated solely with rights. Rights are a key element of democracy.

But there are no rights without responsibility for assuring that those rights are properly protected – carried out responsibly. Rule of law provides this fundamental underpinning to a properly functioning democracy.

Free speech is a right -- and must be protected. But it must be protected only to the extent that free speech does not impinge on the rights of others. Thus, free speech has limits in the interest of society. Laws against hate speech, against slander, against pornography are some examples in which free speech is limited.

Any government must have financial resources to govern. Democracies can assure a more equitable distribution of wealth and can carry out programs decided on by the voters through their elected representatives. A democratic government does not relieve the citizen of the responsibility to pay taxes.

Obedying the law, obeying police, participating in national security – all of these are responsibilities of the citizen and are every bit a part of democracy as the right to assembly or free speech.

And when you assure that with democracy comes responsibility of both the governed and the government – the descent into chaos is no longer seen as inevitably linked with the onset of democracy.

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The transition we celebrate today is an easy one. It is a graduation. Bulgaria emerges into the family of states, the family of societies that take responsibility for themselves, for their citizens and, beyond its borders, for societies undergoing similar transitions.

Bulgarian civil society has developed the habit of action. Bulgarian civil society groups, whether NGO's or community groups, know the importance of generating and shaping community opinion and for galvanizing that into collective action.

Bulgarian groups already know the importance of being inclusive, of generating interest in participating among communities that have traditionally been left out.

I am impressed by the number of Bulgarian NGO's and other groups – having accomplished their goals at home – see their responsibilities in broader terms. They have jumped the borders and are working in the wider region or even further afield.

The highly qualified and successful Bulgarian NGO's might find new work in the region. The Balkan Trust for Civil Society has been created to support NGO's working to unite citizens with government.

The Black Sea Trust Fund is another organization working in the broader region whose goals are no doubt compatible with those of civil society here. It can use the experience and skills of this civil society.

Bravo. This is also a transition – and a very welcome one.

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Lessons:

I'd like to leave you with a few touchstones, as civil society here continues its impressive work.

Vibrant, politically-active civil society is a crucial element of all democratic systems of governance.

Because transitions are inevitable, there will always be a need for an active, engaged civil society.

Transitions are not automatically benevolent. Governments don't know by magic how best to govern.

That's why civil society is important and why its work is never done.

Communities, school systems, health providers, national security apparatus, cannot function in ways that benefit society without the active participation of that society – in the form of collective action.

Collective action can be as simple as expressing opinion through voting. Voting requires voter registration – and voter education. Civil society generates countless groups across the globe to pursue this simple form of civic action.

At the other end of the spectrum, collective action is critical when a transition has collapsed into chaos. Civil society shows up and starts meeting with people, to facilitate discussions of goals, to galvanize individuals into action, to suggest inclusiveness when communities are organizing along more insular lines.

No society can afford to leave any group behind. This is why I emphasize inclusiveness. Inclusiveness is a measure of a mature, developed, democratic society.

In the middle range is another set of issues: to do the kinds of things that governments aren't particularly good at – or to take over action when governments no longer have the budget – or the inclination.

NGO's are an important element of civil society. They are the manifestation of demand-driven social change. They fill voids on issues that government can't or won't handle.

NGO's are flexible and action-oriented. NGO's should not be a static element of the status quo, but should be formed and disbanded depending on demand.

When they have served their purpose, we should thank them and let them disappear.

NGO continuity is no doubt an issue in this assistance transition. When an NGO finds that it is focused more on staying alive – on seeking funding – than on doing the real work that it set out to do, maybe it is time for a reality check. Time for the NGO to reinvent itself. Time to go back to communities to take a measure of what is actually needed.

Funding is the perpetual companion of NGOs and other civil society groups. The U.S. government, through USAID, through Public Diplomacy's Democracy Small Grants and through other assistance mechanisms has funded truly excellent programs. The best are always local initiatives.

With the end of U.S. assistance programs, NGOs and others are searching for other funding sources. The EU is an obvious alternative.

Another funding source is business. Business leaders have every interest in participating in community action. When George Soros's Open Society organization left Russia, a wealthy businessman – Mikhail Khodorkovsky – took over the funding of all the Open Society programs through his Open Russia Foundation. His fate and that of his company, Yukos, and his Foundation are not to be recommended, but is nevertheless a good illustration of business stepping in to fund civil society advocacy and action.

Let me conclude: A committed civil society plays an integral role in the deepening of democracy that leads to democratic consolidation. Success hinges on the abilities of NGOs to organize in ways that maximize their leverage over available resources, as well as their capacity to mobilize potential allies and stakeholders. In transition countries, civil society often remains weak, fragmented and dependent on external donors. Thus, a key issue in the sustainability of democratic, and economic and social reforms is the growth of an NGO sector -- civil society -- that ensures that reforms remain demand-driven.

Bulgaria demonstrates the truth of this statement and the value of this work. I look forward to hearing about how Bulgarian civil society uses its experience to support the work of civil society in places that have not yet made this very commendable transition.

Thank you.