



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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**Developing Civic Engagement: Environmental NGOs and Participatory
Democracy in the Czech Republic**

Topic of Research:

The purpose of my research is to examine the role of environmental NGOs in promoting public participation in local decision-making in the Czech Republic. Despite a number of Czech laws guaranteeing citizens access to information and opportunities for public participation, there has been scant scholarly evidence that these opportunities have been seized upon, in part due to the reluctance of municipal officials to provide local residents with effective access to decision-making processes. I have thus carried out qualitative research examining a range of cases where local associations, particularly environmental NGOs, have significantly improved the quality of participatory, democratic institutions at the local level and have led to a renewal in civic engagement by ordinary citizens in order to sustain them.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field:

This research seeks to contribute to current debates on the development of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe. Though many political theorists and policy experts have heralded the role of civic movements in challenging authoritarian

rule in the CEE and in improving the quality of democratic government, most empirical evidence suggests that the quality and capacity of civil society institutions remain “weak,” impacted above all by societal distrust of political processes, lack of material resources, and legacies of forced political participation under communism. However, empirical research on the role of civil society in improving the quality of democracy in the CEE is generally lacking in a couple of respects. First, most empirical evidence is based on nation-wide surveys, thus overlooking differences in political dynamics at the local level, at precisely those spaces of political decision-making where NGOs and other civic groups can feel empowered to become politically engaged. Second, a large literature exists documenting the legal conditions and opportunities for NGOs to participate in political decision-making, but there have been few in depth case studies examining the political barriers and conditions preventing and facilitating the actual exercise of those opportunities. My work addresses both of these issues by analyzing the role of local factors, and differences in NGO capacities and strategies of mobilization, in improving the degree and quality of public participation in local decision-making. By focusing on one kind of civil society actor (environmental NGOs) and several different forms of participation in decision-making (local referendums, participation in administrative procedures, and the formation of local “green” political parties), my research contributes to the civil society literature by concretely identifying local pathways towards better democratic governance in Central Europe.

The research also contributes to the literature on postcommunist environmental movements. Despite a number of political successes environmental groups achieved immediately after 1989, most commentators have characterized these movements in the postcommunist context as having undergone a period of crisis and decline. In the Czech Republic, the liberal and anti-environmentalist policies of the Klaus government relaxed emissions monitoring of firms, reduced the funding sources of environmental NGOs from the state, and branded prominent environmental NGOs as being “extremist.” In this context, my work argues that for strategic reasons a number of environmental groups turned away from an elitist, lobbying-based model of political influence towards a “civic environmental” model of promoting grassroots community engagement to achieve environmental policy goals, particularly at the local level. My research thus contributes to the environmental politics literature by explaining how the emergence of civic environmentalist political strategies, when successful, can bring together the dual goals of democratic and environmental governance in the region.

Summary of Approach and Research Methodology:

My research involved a number of different methodological strategies that were chosen according to their usefulness for gaining data for each of the forms of participation I have sought to analyze.

Development of Direct Democracy (Local Referendums)

The purpose of this section was to measure the role of environmental NGOs in using and promoting referendums as a form of local governance. My methods included:

- Conducted Content analysis of two Czech newspapers (*Mlada Fronta Dnes* and *Lidove Noviny*) documenting all attempts (successful and unsuccessful) of citizens in initiating local referendums from 1990-2004 in the Czech Republic.
- Conducted open-ended interviews in four different municipalities (Tabor, Plzen, Ivancice, Libouchec) with mayors and city council members, NGO activists involved in referendum campaigns, and lawyers and other experts in referendum law. I chose two of these municipalities (Tabor and Plzen) as comparative case studies, and I thus conducted further interviews in these places. The purpose of the interviews was to gain diverse perspectives on the reasons for initiating a referendum campaign (as opposed to other forms of political influence), strategies and history of the campaign, and views of local elected officials, etc.
- Collected NGO documents, as well as municipal data by accessing city and district level documents and proceedings, including correspondence between city and state officials, conclusions by relevant courts, minutes of city hall meetings, and other texts.

Role of Public Participation in Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs)

The purpose of this section was to measure the degree to which environmental NGOs and concerned citizens participate in EIAs and whether and how this participation influences EIA conclusions. I decided to focus on EIAs since they are a fundamental administrative procedure in which citizens have clear rights to participation and to have their views taken into account in the final decision-making. My methods included:

- Content Analysis of Ministry of the Environment's EIA Information System database (<http://www.ceu.cz/eia/is/>) from 2001-2004, to gain national data on 1) the type of project; 2) region and other demographic data; 3) views of NGOs towards the project, if any; 4) role of concerned residents towards the project, if any; 5) conclusion of the EIA; 6) whether and how the views of NGOs and concerned citizens were taken into account in the conclusion. All of this information is available – and indeed required by law – in the database above.
- I then chose two regions (Karlovy Vary region and Vysocina region) for a comparative case study. I went to these regions and requested access to regional and municipal documents containing information on the points above for all EIAs in those regions from 1991-2001. I am still awaiting some documents, so this process is incomplete.
- Interviews with NGO activists involved in EIA processes in the two regions above. I also conducted interviews with officials at the Ministry of Environment, EIA section. The purpose of the interviews was to get additional information on how NGOs perceived their role in the EIA

process, how they evaluated that processes, and what influence they have had on EIA proceedings.

Formation of Local “Green” Political Parties

This section of my research is based on the notion that one way environmental NGOs could try to participate in local decision-making (and to promote greater civic engagement among local residents) is to create “green” political parties and movements at the local level. A “green” party is one that has environmental ideas as a leading component of the party or movement platform, but of course is not limited to those ideas. My hypothesis was that the most successful green parties at the local level would be ones that 1) included the promotion of “civic engagement” or broad public discussions as a primary component of their platforms; and 2) forged close ties with local environmental NGOs on which they can gain resources and support. My methods included:

- Analysis of nationwide municipal election results for years 1994, 1998, and 2002. The Czech Statistical Office’s elections database is at www.volby.cz. For each of these elections, I identified all of the political parties that gained at least one seat in a municipal board, and determined their “green” orientation. Of the green parties, I then identified which parties either won the municipal elections or were members of the ruling coalition in the city council (this was my determinant of a “successful” party). I am still processing much of this data.
- On the basis of the analysis above, I have selected one political party – Hranice 2000 in Hranice – as a case study, where I conducted a number of interviews with the leadership of the party. I also interviewed leading members of the Tabor 2002 ecological-political movement, but I am still uncertain at this moment if I will include it as a case study since the previous chapter on referendums also discusses Tabor in depth. Interviews and data analysis are therefore the two main components of this chapter of my research.

Other elements

To gain additional data on the Czech environmental movement not available in the literature, I also conducted the following informal forms of research:

- Carried out an informal content analysis of all editions of *Sedma Generace* and *Arnikum* (the two main Czech environmental magazines) since their inception, which codes articles according to their references to public participation, the type of environmental problem at issue, the political actors that are mentioned, etc. The purpose of the analysis is to trace a number of developments in Czech environmentalism relevant to my chapters.
- Engaged in participant observation at Hnutí DUHA, one of the most influential environmental NGOs in the country. I wanted to do this in order to get a first-hand knowledge of how decisions are made (particularly how political campaigns are chosen and which strategies of action they choose), what NGO “capacity” means in practice, the influence of local

chapters on the central DUHA office, as well as the history of the NGO. This is helping me to write qualitatively richer and more comprehensive chapters, even though those chapters focus on other groups. In concrete terms, I attended a large number of monthly strategic meetings of the NGO in Brno, attended the annual meeting, participated in several group events, and occasionally helped out with work in the Prague office.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions:

My conclusions are still very preliminary, yet they confirm many aspects of my research hypothesis: that environmental NGOs have increasingly turned towards the promotion of public participation as a way to achieve environmental policy goals. Social and policy learning have been important processes in sharing expertise about how to mobilize communities around environmental issues. In the chapters on local referendums and EIAs, my work shows that NGO legal capacity is a fundamental condition for ensuring that municipal or other authorities do not infringe upon people's right to participate in those forms of decision-making. In this sense my work elucidates the role of the legal transition in deepening local democratic practices.

My main findings to date concern the local referendum aspect of my research. Since 1990, Czech citizens have attempted to initiate 28 local referendums, 22 of which actually led to referendum votes. *All* of these attempts took place in 2000-2004 period, despite the fact that the Law on Local Elections and Referendums was in place since 1992. My work has explained this surge in referendum politics due to the Tabor referendum, in which local environmental activists were able over a several year period to finally develop legal and civic environmentalist strategies to successfully prevent the city hall from canceling the referendum. Knowledge of that experience spread to other environmental NGOs also wanting to use referendums to achieve policy goals. It is very striking that *of the 22 local referendums that have taken place, 19-20 of them have concerned environmental issues*. The most successful campaigns have been those that 1) developed legal expertise on the referendum law and related legislation; and 2) developed a grassroots, civic movement (as opposed to a do-it-yourself campaign) that transcended ecological discourse to reach out to broader constituencies in the city.

Since I am still processing the data for my other two cases (on EIAs and green parties), I cannot present any specific conclusions, though my hypotheses expressed above are being confirmed.

Suggestions for Future Research Agendas:

Specific suggestions for future research include:

- Further comparative analyses (between CEE states) of the development of environmental movements in the postcommunist period.

- Comparative analyses of local referendums and referendum law between procommunist states.
- Comparative analyses of postcommunist green parties – including local parties and movements – are very much needed.
- The role of foreign donors and lenders (particularly the EU) in fostering or inhibiting public participation in decision-making through donor/lender practices (the European Investment Bank has supported many development projects that sidestepped public participation requirements in the decision-making).

Recommendations for the US Policy Community:

Specific recommendations I would make for US policymakers include:

- Ensuring that a portion of donor funds are used for projects promoting public outreach, public education, and public participation in decision-making. This may require that donor agencies give a larger percentage of funds to community associations (as opposed to “favorite” national groups).
- Legal training, networking, or the development of legal capacities are essential needs for many environmental NGOs (as well as many other NGOs) to have. Greater focus and concentration can be given to this area. It also requires that donors pay specific attention to the capacity needs of NGOs themselves.
- “Democratic governance” has virtually become an empty word in the policy community. If US policymakers want to promote processes leading to greater democratic consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe, they should sponsor projects that specifically explain how the project in question promotes structures of representation, accountability, or forms of civic engagement. Research has shown that NGO activities can also lead to undemocratic practices.