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The Impact of Civic Engagement on The Quality of Life in Hungary

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As a contribution to the Social Situation Report 2007, the Terms of Reference for this paper was to produce a 5-page review of Hungarian literature addressing the question "how does civil society engagement impact on life satisfaction and quality of life?"

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question of how civil society engagement impact impacts on life satisfaction and quality of life in Hungary. It takes a broad approach to engagement, looking at membership, donations as well as neighborliness and obligations towards others. While the causal relationship between the two have not been studied in Hungary, the paper refers to several studies on the relationship between pre-time mortality (middle-aged man) and social capital indicators such as membership in associations.

1. Introduction: the relationship between diversity and trust in the community

In this paper, we attempt to answer this question by taking a broad approach to engagement, looking at membership, donations as well as neighborliness and obligations towards others. We also include the latest polls on satisfaction and the quality of life in Hungary. Whilst there is a fair amount of material on these topics, there was only study that we found that investigated in detail the casual relationship between engagement and quality of life.

Since a new legal form for foundations was introduced in 1987, the sector has grown rapidly.¹ The latest figures from the Hungarian Statistical Office show that in 2006 there were 76,884 nonprofit associations in Hungary, up from 50,601 a decade earlier.² The growth has many causes. In the 1990s, the central state withdrew from previous positions leaving many social services in the hands of local authorities. The latter was only too happy to encourage public involvement in the support of local schools, kindergartens, hospitals and there were many foundations established for these purposes. There has also been an increasing diversification of NGOs with pressure groups, professional associations, cultural bodies, educational and sporting clubs being formed. One of the main spurs for the setting up of a foundation is the possibility of benefiting from tax free donations via the 1% law. Nurseries, kindergarten and schools particularly value these revenues. In 2004, 6.9 billion HUF (approx. 28 million Euro) was donated to NGOs in this way, the average citizen allocating 5100 HUF (approx. 20 Euro) from his taxes and each NGO receiving on average 302,000 HUF (1200 Euro).³

Whilst there may have been an NGO boom, actual participation rates, as indicated by membership levels, is low compared to the EU average. Only 21% claim to be a member of any organization, and only Romania and Bulgaria had lower figures in 2004. A recent Eurobarometer survey found that active participation or voluntary work in Hungary were at lower levels than other European countries, with only 17% of citizens reporting that they actively participating or did voluntary work.⁴ Earlier analysis of the civil sector by Nagy also suggests that the increase in NGOs should not be taken to indicate greater civic engagement. Whilst there was a twofold increase in local development civic organizations between 1997-2002, there was also a drop of 10% in the numbers of NGO employees and active

1 The Hungarian Environment for Endowments and Financial Sustainability Robert N. Thomas Prague 2003 http://www.nonprofit.hu/files/2/0/5/205_Hungarian%20Report%20-%20Final.doc

2 Hungarian Central Statistical Office, http://portal.ksh.hu/pls/ksh/docs/hun/xstadat/tabl2_01_02_01a.html

3 http://www.nonprofit.hu/files/2/1/3/5/2135_statisztik%E1k%20v%E1ltoz%E1sa.doc

4 The survey was carried out in late 2006 and can be found at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_273_en.pdf

volunteers.⁵ According to Megeysi and Gyorgy, a majority of Hungarians are wary or indifferent to organized civic activity. When asked how important they thought it was to take part in any political or societal associations over half put this statement between 1-3 on a 7-point scale.⁶

At the same time, there is some need to be cautious about these figures and what they mean. A 2005 study of donations and volunteerism, for example, found that the time donated for voluntary work had increased by 40% compared with ten years earlier.⁷ Much of the anthropological criticism of ‘Civil Society’ in post-socialist countries was that participation in formally registered NGOs was being taken as the only measure of engagement in public life.⁸ So for example, using the idea of donation in a broad sense, a 2005 study, found that 80% said that they had made at least of the following donations in the previous year: financial donation, donation in kind, voluntary unpaid work or blood donation. A similar study from 10 years earlier, found that for all donations except blood donation there had been an increase with the number of persons being involved in two or more of these activities having risen from 51 to 68%.⁹ This is four times the rate uncovered by the questions posed by Eurobarometer at the end of last year.

Another way of measuring engagement is the willingness of individuals to intervene in risky situations for the benefit for a neighbor. According to Medgeysi and Gyorgy, 80% said that they would notify the police “if they saw someone breaking into the neighbor’s house”, but only 52 percent thought the neighbors would do the same for them. One further indicator which might be taken as a sign of engagement is the frequency of contacts with friends or family. When Szonda Ipsos asked about different spare-time activities, meeting with relatives was as popular as meeting with friends, with around one third of respondents saying that they did so weekly.¹⁰

In terms of life satisfaction, the most recent Eurobarometer report from February 2007, showed that Hungary was at the lower end of general life satisfaction levels in EU.¹¹ Hungary scored 3.49 out of 5, with Portugal, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania and Bulgaria coming behind. Almost two-thirds of the population said that they were satisfied with their standard of living and almost three-quarters said that they were happy with their quality of life. A sense of security in one’s own neighborhood was higher than in other countries with 69% of respondents saying that they felt they could walk safely alone after dark in their own area.¹² 41% report that they find their work too demanding or stressful, which is on par with EU average.¹³ Another poll from February 2007 finds that there has been some positive development regarding personal worries. In comparison with 2003, fewer people claim to be worried about illness, for themselves or family members, by loneliness or war.

There have been some polls showing growing numbers who find the economic situation a problem and, as mentioned earlier, the rate of persons finding the high numbers of foreigners in the country

5 Nagy Renata et al (2003). Nonprofit szervezetek Magyarországon 2003. Central Statistical Office

6 Medgeysi Marton és Toth István György, 2005. Kockázat, bizalom és részvétel a Magyar gazdaságban és társadalomban. Downloadable at <http://www.socialnetwork.hu/cikkek/tarsTokeKotet.pdf> page 129

7 Kuti Éva - Czike Klára: Citizens' donations and voluntary activities. Flash report on the findings of the 2004 survey at <http://www.nonprofitkutatas.hu/letoltendo/citizens.pdf>

8 See for instance, the articles by Ruth Mandel and Steven Sampson in C.M.Hann (ed.), *Postsocialism: Ideas, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002

9 Kuti Éva - Czike Klára op cit

10 <http://www.szondaipsos.hu/>.

11 Data collection November-December 2006, available at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_273_en.pdf

12 Eurobarometer, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_273_en.pdf

13 *ibid*

problematic.¹⁴ The majority of people in Hungary claim to be disappointed with the changes since 1990. A growing number of people find demoralization a problem, with 64% rating the “disappearance of old morals” a serious problem, compared with 58% four years ago.

The final report that we will look at sought to determine how far social factors were an influence over mortality rates in Hungary. Researchers from Semmelweis Medical University led by Maria Kopp tried to explain why mortality rates amongst middle-age men in Hungary were so much higher than in any other European country.¹⁵ Between 1960 and 2005, mortality rates for the 40-69 age group increased by 55%, or, put another way, in 2005 11,300 more men in this age bracket died compared with 35 years earlier.¹⁶ The researchers used data from over 12,000 persons, and in the variables considered, membership of civic organizations was included together with questions about trust and reciprocity. One variable was called collective efficacy which was described as a belief in the value of undertaking coordinated actions. It was first used in the 1995 Community Survey on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods and is based on two main components, “social cohesion” which is the ability of neighborhoods to realize common values of the residents and “informal social control”, a belief that neighbors would intervene in risky situations.¹⁷

The Semmelweis study found that after education, collective efficacy, was the strongest factor in preventing premature death. As a determining factor, the researchers found it more significant than not smoking or drinking excess alcohol. Social capital along with involvement in religious organizations was also significantly positively associated with mortality. In early 2007, a follow-up study was presented with fieldwork from 2005 containing interviews with nearly 5,000 out of the original sample.¹⁸ 8,8% of the men and 3,6% of the women had died since the first study with cancer caused most of the deaths, followed by cardiovascular diseases. The analysis showed that a positive life quality reduced the risk of dying early by half for men. A sense of meaning to life and a secure working place reduced the risk threefold, as did regular exercise. These findings took traditional factors and risks into account such as age, education, smoking, and alcohol consumption and body weight.

The most important reasons for the high mortality rates in Hungary were increasing levels of chronic depression and stress. Here, the situation has not improved since 2002 when, using the so-called Beck Depression Inventory which is an index based on 21 self-reporting items, 10 percent of men in the study were classified as gravely or moderately depressed.¹⁹ In 2005, that figure increased to 15%. For women the rate was even higher, increasing from 15% to 19%. This means that almost every fifth grown-up is suffering from depression and/or chronic stress. Other risk factors were not living with a spouse/partner, or having a spouse with low socioeconomic status (significant association).²⁰

Although the research did not include this, there have been other studies which highlighted the increase in the number of single person households amongst the elderly, and the relatively high feelings of isolation and disconnection felt. Bocz and Harcsa analysed inter-household transactions between 1986 and 2000. finding that the majority of those who only found themselves giving were between 40-69, and that those who tended only to receive were less than 40 or older than 70 years. In other words,

14 Poll by Gfk, summary accessible at <http://www.gfk.hu/sajtokoz/fr6.htm>

15 Maria Kopp et al, “Social capital and collective efficacy in Hungary: cross sectional associations with middle aged female and male mortality, *Journal of Epidemal Community Health* (2004) 58” Downloadable at <http://jech.bmj.com/cgi/reprint/58/4/340.pdf>

16 Media material available at <http://www.sote.hu/>

17 See Sampson R.J., Raudenbuch S.W. and Earls F. ‘Neighborhoods and violent crime, a multilevel study of collective efficacy’ *Science* 1997: 227: 918-24

18 <http://www.sote.hu/>

19 <http://www.swin.edu.au/victims/resources/assessment/affect/bdi.html>

20 <http://jech.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/59/8/675>

the younger generation got support from the oldest ones – especially from their parents. This might not be so significant, particularly in a climate of rapid social and economic changes. What is perhaps significant is that while earlier the transactions were more or less reciprocal, by 2000, there were many more that could be characterized as being one-way.²¹

The relationship between civic engagement and quality of life is obviously difficult to pin down. From the Skrabbi and Kopp studies, a belief in collective efficacy, that you know people who can be trusted, that collective action can solve problems, that social relations provide both obligation and meaning, seems to be positively associated with living longer. At the same time, the mixed bag of surveys seem to show that Hungarians do not consider a strong need to get involved in organised civic action, perhaps preferring instead to engage with family and friends. The increased levels of NGOs and donations might be connected to easier forms of giving and changes in the provision of previously publicly funded services rather than fundamental shifts in how people engage. But then, as we have tried to argue, it would be a mistake to reduce social capital simply to taking part in a non-governmental organization.

21 János Bocz and István Harcsa 2001: The characteristics of the interhousehold transactions in Hungary in the mid eighties and the late nineties. Paper presented at Sunbelt XXI – International Sunbelt Social Network Conference. 2001 Budapest, Hungary