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Civic Service in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: From Mandatory Public Work Toward Civic Service?

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This article tries to take an initial step toward developing a systematic body of knowledge on civic service in the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. It seeks to identify those elements of the cultural and historical background and the present social, political, and economic challenges that have a significant effect on the development of service programs. Based on the available anecdotal and research information, the article gives an overview of civic services, their goals, actual forms, predominant types, and institutional background. Motivations, sociodemographic characteristics, and social embeddedness of the participants of service programs are also discussed. The final part of the article offers a list of possible research approaches and projects that would be necessary to understand all aspects of this complex and heterogeneous set of interactions.

Keywords: civic service; voluntary work; transition process; post-communist countries

A truly comparative study is unthinkable without a generally accepted working definition of the subject to be explored. For the purposes of the present project, Sherraden (2001a) defines civic service as “an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national, or world community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to the participant” (p. 2). Answering the question whether and how this definition fits the obviously diverse practices in different regions of the world can only be an outcome of some pilot studies.

This article is one of these pilot studies. It tries to take an initial step toward developing a systematic body of knowledge on civic service in the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Its first section identifies those elements of the cultural and historical background that have a significant effect on the development of service programs. Successive sections give an overview of civic services, their goals, actual forms, predominant types, and institutional background and try to explore their relations with present social, political, and
economic challenges. The article concludes by considering future research approaches and projects that would further our chances of analyzing Eastern European and Central Asian experience in comparative perspective.

Eastern Europe and Central Asia contain an extremely heterogeneous mix of countries. Their only common feature is that they all belonged to the Soviet Bloc until 1989. Some of them (Russia itself, Belarus, Ukraine, the Baltic states, and the countries in Central Asia) were member republics of the Soviet Union, whereas all the others were either enthusiastic or reluctant allies. Several of them (e.g., Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia) had even open conflicts with the Soviet Union. Although all Soviet Bloc countries were supposed to build socialism, they did it in various ways. Both the level of repression and the scope for private initiatives changed from country to country. Thus, despite the basically similar official ideology and political regime, the legacy of the state socialist period is rather different in different countries of the region. This period (much longer in the republics of the Soviet Union than in other Eastern European countries) represented only some decades of the national history, thus its homogenizing effect was significantly limited by the different social, cultural, and political traditions of the specific countries.

Because citizen service is a social product, its status, role, and actual importance can only be understood if we know the cultural and historical background and manage to examine the development of civic service in a wide range of policy contexts.

Our working definition (Sherraden, 2001b) implies that there are three major conditions for the development of civic service. They are as follows:

- Culture, values, attitudes, and traditions that create a generally favorable climate for private initiatives, for citizens’ participation, and thus for the recognition of civic service.
- A significant number of citizens who are willing and able to do voluntary work involving a standing engagement and minimal or no compensation.
- Civil society organizations and/or government schemes that provide civic service with appropriate institutional infrastructure.

It goes without saying that these conditions cannot be created overnight. The collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989 brought about crucial political changes but it could only slightly modify the cultural patterns, values, and attitudes deeply rooted in the history of the region.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There is a latent disagreement between the analysts of civil society over the importance of recent history in postcommunist countries. A significant part of the researchers take for granted that attitudes and aspirations were dramatically distorted, proclivities for volunteering were undermined under Soviet
rule, “passiveness and apathy exists” (Bezovan, 2001, p. 4); and improvement will “depend on a new generation” (Johnson & Young, 1997, p. 317). Their reasoning is based on the assumption that the poisonous influence of officials will last: People who were obliged to “volunteer” (in fact, to do mandatory public work in the name of the public good) will be neither ready nor able to organize voluntary work on their own initiative.

The contrasting view is based on the assumption that the state socialist experience is only one (and not necessarily the most important) factor determining the rise of civil society: “In every Eastern European country, the non-profit sector will be greatly affected by the imprint of the nation’s own special history and culture” (Snavely & Desai, 1995, p. 37).

In spite of the common experience of Soviet rule, this special history is very different in different parts of the region. The classification of countries (Northern Tier and Southern Tier of Eastern Europe and Eurasia) developed by The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on the basis of the present social and economic indicators (see Figure 1) seems to be also appropriate from a historical point of view.

The Northern Tier is made up of the Central European and Baltic countries. The Southern Tier is practically the former Yugoslavia and the Balkan, whereas republics of the former Soviet Union are called Eurasia. As it is displayed in Figure 1, these countries are dramatically different in both economic and political terms. These differences have developed against a background shaped by their history and culture.

NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE, POLITICAL FREEDOM, AND CIVIC INITIATIVES

The Central European and Baltic countries culturally belonged to Europe or, at least, belonging to Europe was in the center of their aspirations and efforts. Foreign occupation or (in best case) limited independence, prolonged feudalism, delayed embourgeoisement, economic backwardness, statist regimes, underdeveloped self-governments, and social, religious, and ethnic tensions were the major characteristics of their pre-Soviet history. However, they were not hermetically separated from Western Europe, especially because their foreign rulers were mainly the Western empires from the 17th to 18th centuries. Maybe with some delay and somewhat distorted, the really strong cultural and political movements (Enlightenment, national and reform movements, liberalism, modernization) had an effect on this Eastern periphery as well.

Voluntary organizations played a key role in drawing together the problems of national independence, industrialization, embourgeoisement, and social, economic, and cultural development in these countries in the late 18th and the 19th centuries. They also contributed to developing citizens’ awareness of the importance of these matters and their responsibility for the future of society. While fulfilling important innovation and modernization func-
tions, they helped foster private initiatives and strengthen the culture of government/nonprofit cooperation.

The history of the Southern Tier of Eastern Europe was significantly different. None of its countries remained an independent state after the Turkish invasion in the 15th to 16th centuries, although several of them kept reminiscence...
ences of having been an imperial power at some earlier stage of their history. They suffered from Turkish rule for much longer than other European countries; their occupation ended only in the second half of the 19th century. Consequently, their backward position was frozen; there was very little chance for either economic modernization or embourgeoisement.

People were treated as subordinates and could hardly develop citizens’ attitudes. Relations with Western Europe were much weaker than in Central European countries, thus the European pattern of civic initiatives and self-organization did not have much effect. The relatively short period of independence between the Turkish occupation and the Soviet rule did not offer enough opportunities to develop civil society. Partnership between the government and voluntary groups could not be established either.

Eurasia represented another path of development, again. With the exception of Russia that built an empire, step by step, since the 14th century and became the dominant power of the region, the other countries were mainly the victims of various invaders. Short periods of independence and long periods of foreign dominance characterized the history of some of them (e.g., Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia), whereas some others (e.g., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) never managed to form an independent nation state (Nowicki, 2000, pp. 220-221). Finally, they all became a part of the still-feudal Russian Empire and then republics of the Soviet Union.

This kind of history practically prevented the development of civic initiatives, let alone autonomous organization of civil society. The permanent lack of even the minimal conditions (some degree of freedom, the presence of an educated middle class, some room for independent action) explains that organized civic movements caused little headache to both Russian czars and Soviet leaders in this part of the region. The culture of obedience was developed and strengthened throughout centuries. The Western-type culture was much too distant and largely unknown to have a noticeable effect on either behavior or aspirations.

These differences between the historical background of different parts of Eastern Europe and Central Asia correspond with the religious traditions, too.

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

The major religion in all countries of the Northern Tier of Eastern Europe is either Roman Catholic or Protestant, whereas the Orthodox Church or Islam are dominant in all but two countries of the Southern Tier and Eurasia. These differences are important from our point of view because churches are potential organizers of faith-based services and charity as a part of religious practice. Charitable activities obviously have some influence on the general attitude toward volunteering.

The Catholic Church, although it had been the very first “benevolent entrepreneur,” did not remain an exclusive institutional framework for fulfilling the philanthropic obligations deeply rooted in its theology. Lay authorities
kings, municipalities), guilds, landlords, and lay fraternities all took some part in charitable activities already in the Middle Ages (Kuti, 1996, pp. 13-19). The emergence of the Protestant Church resulted in even more competition and diversity. Thus, the strong religious requirement to help the needy could be easily met outside the arena of the churches. In other words, being a good Christian involved doing charitable work, but philanthropic activities could be exercised through lay charities, as well.

Several authors argue that “the Orthodox Church, . . . unlike the Catholic Church in Western and Central Europe, failed to foster the notion of charity and the responsibility of individuals to take on a significant role in social affairs” (Salamon et al., 1999, p. 342). This “neglect of the dominant Orthodox Church to stress the value of charity in its theology” (World Bank, 1999, p. 5) probably had a negative effect on both the people’s willingness to do voluntary work and the development of an organizational infrastructure of charitable activities. This cultural background might be an important explanatory factor of the present difficulties, the repeatedly mentioned problem of “the public’s reluctance to volunteer” (Kuts, 2001, p. 5). Beside the legacy of the communist period, this religious background is also likely to have some influence on the perspectives of civic service in the Orthodox countries.

By contrast, charity is among the very pillars of the faith in Islam (Kandil, 1995):

“Zakat” or tithing and “Sadaqa” or almsgiving (mentioned thirty times in the Quoran) are intended to motivate Moslems to help their fellowmen with money, work, and provide all other forms of support within an Islamic system of “social interdependence.” This system propagates solidarity and the support of the needy. Since the dawn of Islam, mosques assumed the role of links between the donors and recipients of charities. (p. 28)

This concentration on the mosques (together with the poverty and the relatively low educational level of the majority of people) was probably a serious obstacle to the development of lay charities in Central Asia. The lack of private initiatives made these local cultures extremely vulnerable during Soviet times when the Kremlin made serious efforts to eradicate religious beliefs and church influence on citizens’ behavior.

To be summarized, even this very short overview of the cultural and historical differences seems to suggest that, harmful as it was, the common communist experience could not set uniform conditions for the development of civic service in the transition countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Although all three groups of countries have many similar problems and suffer from the drawbacks of the Soviet-type mandatory public work, their third sectors are at different crossroads (Kuti, 1998, 1999), the challenges with which they have to cope are different. Although private initiatives are almost com-
pletely free in the Northern Tier of Eastern Europe, even the basic rights are deficient in several countries of Central Asia (Abdusalyamova, 2002).

Authoritarian history is not completely over and the emancipation of private voluntary organizations is not completely finished, thus conditions for the development of civic service are far from ideal. The conceptualizations of civic service as a strong policy that has many positive effects and provides an exceptional return on investment (Sherraden, 2001c) are very unlikely in most countries of the region. The old and new types of service projects exist side by side. Their “cohabitation” frequently results in rivalry and political conflicts that might even threaten their legitimacy and sustainability.

OLD PROBLEMS AND NEW CHALLENGES:
SURVIVING OLD AND EMERGING NEW FORMS OF CIVIC SERVICE IN THE TRANSITION PERIOD

The collapse of the Soviet empire was an outcome of the deepening economic crisis. The state socialist system reached its limits; the transition to a market economy and some kind of democratization became unavoidable. However, this transition could not solve the accumulated social and economic problems in the short run. What is more, it created some new challenges (e.g., unemployment, poverty and widening income gap, growing crime rate and drug problems, etc.) and let previously hidden problems (e.g., ethnic conflicts, human rights violations, environmental issues, etc.) come to light. Under these circumstances, a lot depended on the citizens’ willingness and ability to play an active and creative role in managing the transition. In fact, the current size, structure, and importance of service programs have been formed in a triangle of citizens, government, and representatives of foreign aid organizations. The more mature and flexible the local civil society was, the more it could influence the pace and direction of changes.

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF SERVICE PROGRAMS

The role played by the different actors naturally had an effect on the geographic scope of service programs. Grassroots groups naturally tend to organize their programs at a local or regional level. Government programs are more likely to involve citizens of the whole country; their scope is mainly national. Transnational programs can be initiated by either the government or large voluntary organizations interested in international exchange. Finally, the overwhelming majority of international service programs in Eastern Europe and Central Asia are organized from abroad, by foreign charities and international aid agencies.

The reports commissioned by CIVICUS (1997), Freedom House, World Bank, and The United States Agency for International Development all seem
to suggest that international service programs are predominant in Central Asia and in the civil war countries of the Balkan. Researchers (Babb, 1999; Frič, Deverová, Pajas, & Šilhánová, 1998; Leš, Nałęcz, & Wygnański, 2000; Mikuš Kos, 2001; Széman & Harsányi, 2000) have located much more local and national programs in the Northern Tier of Eastern Europe where civic initiatives have stronger traditions and the democratization process has been more rapid in the 1990s. Similarly, EU candidate countries of the Northern Tier are seemingly more motivated to develop transnational service projects that are expected to strengthen European citizenship and, therefore, make the accession process smoother.

SERVER GROUPS

Concern about the economic and social challenges is also reflected in the sociodemographic composition of servers. Beside the three service types (youth, senior, and faith-based) identified by the core GSI team (McBride, Benítez, & Sherraden, 2003), there are two other prominent target groups in the Eastern European and Central Asian service projects: that of the unemployed and women.

Unemployment definitely has been the most traumatic experience of the 1990s in the transition countries of the region. Full employment was regarded and praised as one of the major achievements of the state socialist regime. Adult citizens had a constitutional right to be employed. The emergence of mass unemployment has literally shocked both private individuals and political leaders. Governments and several voluntary organizations feel obliged to alleviate the unemployment problem. They organize civic service programs focusing on the unemployed to offer them an opportunity to learn new skills, build relationships, and thus get back to the labor market.

The emergence of women as another prominent target group of servers has a very different origin. The rebirth of civil society in the former Soviet Bloc countries attracted a lot of foreign aid in the form of funding, professional assistance, and volunteers from the developed world. This also meant some kind of “exporting” values, approaches, and preferences. The Western feminist groups were extremely active in initiating service programs in the transition countries (Karatnycky, Motyl, & Piano, 2001). That is how the self-help groups of single mothers, shelter centers for victims of domestic violence, phone services providing psychological counseling for women, legal assistance programs against job discrimination and sexual harassment, and so on appeared throughout the region, even in countries where the local culture was anything but favorable for the feminist way of thinking.

In contrast with women, youth has always been an outstanding target group of service programs. The “proper ideological orientation of the next generation” (Panova, Lopukhin, & Kedzie, 2001) was extremely important for state socialist governments. Youth participation in everyday charitable activities and huge public-work projects seemed to be an appropriate vehicle for
educating “Soviet-type” citizens. High schools, universities, and youth organizations played an equally important role in organizing youth service, thus a large part of its institutional background remained unchanged after 1989. In many cases, the very same activities (e.g., agricultural and construction work, health and social care, etc.) are performed in the very same locations, although sometimes under the auspices of newly created organizations (Harrill, 2001a, 2001b; Panova et al., 2001; Wizner, 2002).

There is a significant overlap between youth and faith-based services in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Either the traditional local churches or their proselytizing foreign counterparts engage in launching service programs and recruiting volunteers; they clearly give preference to the younger generations. Their very first target group is, understandably enough, youth. The volunteers whom one can regularly see in church-related shelters, charity shops, or soup kitchens are mainly young people. After decades of crude political oppression, the churches seemingly try to invest in the future.

Unfortunately, this attitude is largely shared by the government and lay voluntary organizations. Unlike in the United States (Carden, 2001) or in Western Europe, the elderly appear extremely rarely as a target group of the civic service programs. A neglect of the elderly as possible servers seems to be a general phenomenon in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, although we can find some examples of senior service programs in every country: for example, the Generation Pensioners Movement in Kazakhstan (Nowicki, 2000) or the self-help health emergency information network of the elderly in Hungary (Széman & Harsányi, 2000). This probably has to do with the fact that the population, especially in the Central Asian part of the region, is significantly younger than in the developed world. However, an enormous voluntary work potential remains untapped, and a huge number of senior citizens, who could contribute to the solution of social problems, feel lonely and superfluous.

This untapped potential is all the more pitiful because an overview of the areas of civic service reveals that the existing projects can meet only a small part of the challenges.

MAJOR FIELDS OF CIVIC SERVICE

As it was pointed out by the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, “recreation organizations, many of which were tolerated or even encouraged during the Communist period, play a much larger part in the structure of the nonprofit sector in most of Central and Eastern Europe than they do in Western Europe” (Salamon et al., 1999, p. 283). The same holds true, of course, for civic service. It is hardly accidental that the Center for Social Development’s global assessment of civic service (McBride et al., 2003) identified some service programs that can be qualified as “service vacations” or “volunteer eco-tourism.” These programs, or at least their predecessors, have been in existence for decades; in some cases, even their organizers are the same youth organizations. Only their former names (summer work camps,
international construction camps, student exchange programs) have been
slightly modified, and the circle of the possible exchange partners has wid-
ened significantly. They play an important role in educating Eastern European
and Central Asian youth as more or less emancipated members of the interna-
tional community, even if their actual service output is sometimes negligible.

However, in many other, much less-developed service areas, the output
would be desperately needed, too. Both the legacy of the state socialist period
and the transition process itself represent a whole series of challenges in the
fields of social welfare, environment, economic and community develop-
ment, education, and culture. There are very promising and even very suc-
cessful projects that try to meet these challenges. Local experts and interna-
tional observers mention several examples of service programs in the fields of
health and social care (e.g., SOS telephone lines, family planning assistance,
shelters for the homeless and orphans, special assistance for the disabled,
etc.), in education and culture (integrated education programs for handi-
capped children, preparatory courses for the poor, schools for drop-out chil-
dren, programs for the preservation of cultural heritage, etc.), in environment
protection and emergency (projects related to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster;
pollution monitoring services and pollution abatement programs, etc.), in
economic and community development and public safety (agricultural and
small business development support, sheltered employment and training for
the unemployed, anticorruption programs, neighborhood watch services,
etc.), and in human rights (psychological support for victims, conflict reso-
lution assistance, legal consulting, protection of the consumer rights, etc.).

Beside these ordinary service programs, the local civil society was able to
give a prompt response to the tragic challenges created by the civil wars and
the waves of refugees in Yugoslavia and Albania. Some other programs reflect
citizens’ commitment to democracy. There are some indications that govern-
ment/civil society partnership also started to develop even in countries with
very little democratic tradition. This kind of partnership—the recognition of
the importance of civic service by public authorities—would be all the more
important because the provision of services involves a series of costs that
should be, at least partly, covered by the state or local governments.

MONETARY COMPENSATION

These costs are, of course, higher if servers receive some monetary compen-
sation or in-kind support, and somewhat lower if they are unpaid volunteers.
Until quite recently, unpaid (and frequently forced) volunteering was the gen-
eral pattern in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, but the conditions have dra-
matically changed since 1989. Lots of the service volunteers have lost their
paid jobs, and the services they provide are of growing importance. (It is also
worth mentioning at this point that in the international aid programs, un-
paid local volunteers might work together with Western volunteers whose
monthly living allowance is usually much higher than the yearly per capita
income in Central Asian countries.) Under these new circumstances, it will probably be unavoidable to offer some minimal financial compensation to volunteers.

This is made even more likely by the changes in the intensity of the service role. Originally, the “two wage earners model” was prevalent in the whole Soviet Bloc. Both husband and wife were supposed to work because of the extremely low wages. As a consequence, there were very few adults who could participate in voluntary work on a full-time basis. Full-time participation was possible for students when they attended summer work camps, but ordinary national or local service programs had to accept part-time servers.

If we try to evaluate the new economic circumstances from the point of view of civic service, it is difficult to avoid replicating the approach of the Prince of Wales who, in a speech in 1932, “described high unemployment as a national opportunity for voluntary social service” (Deakin, 2001, p. 45). In fact, the emergence of unemployment that is regarded as a disaster by the citizens of the transition countries, at the same time, broadens the potential for the expansion of full-time civic service.

GOALS, EFFECTS, AND INSTITUTION BUILDING

The consequences of the direct influence of economic difficulties are also detectable in the mechanisms of setting the goals and evaluating the effects of service programs.

SETTING GOALS AND MEASURING EFFECTS

One can identify three competing approaches in setting the goals for civic service in Eastern Europe, namely those of the “économie sociale,” “social capital,” and “civil society.”

Économie sociale is originally a French concept (Archambault, 1996) that has been accepted by the European Union, too. It is found attractive by a growing number of Eastern European policy makers because it emphasizes the importance of sharing responsibility between governments and all kinds of private social establishments and services, including not only the nonprofit organizations but also the cooperatives and mutuals. This approach implies that a major goal of the relatively broadly defined civic service is to participate in solving economic and social problems.

The social capital concept “refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993, p. 167). This efficiency is desperately needed in the transition countries where the whole fabric of society was seriously damaged by a series of authoritarian regimes, and the “patterns of socioeconomic, political, and cultural practice are marked by the large and prominent presence of informality” (Böröcz, 2000, p. 125).
Hence, building social capital is of utmost importance. It is no wonder, then, that several activists and policy makers would give preference to those civic service projects that can considerably increase social capital.

Civil society is a political concept in Eastern Europe (Anheier, Glasius, & Kaldor, 2001). It is created and developed by various forms of civic initiatives and self organization, mainly institutionalized as voluntary organizations that mediate between the citizen and the state and between the citizen and economic power. When used in setting the goals for civic service, this approach results in a focus on the civic education aspect of service programs.

In short, goals of the civic service programs seem to be more numerous and more varied in Eastern Europe and Central Asia than in the developed world. Accordingly, their effect should be measured in several different ways.

Ordinary statistical data (e.g., the number of clients of social and health service, size of the forest cleaned by the participants of an environmental project, etc.) can be used to evaluate the output-oriented service programs. As it was pointed out by Putnam himself and several other researchers (e.g., the participants of a panel at the ARNOVA Conference in 2001) since then, there are lots of more or less reliable indicators of the success or failure of building social capital, as well. The most mysterious is the effect of programs trying to strengthen civil society because the changes in citizens’ attitudes are an outcome of a complex set of effects. Distinguishing between civic service effect and the numerous other influences looks rather hopeless, even in principle. In practice, there are serious problems already on the most basic level. One meets a series of difficulties when trying to get access to any reliable information on service programs in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. What is available usually proves to be fragmentary and mainly anecdotal. In many cases, the effects are reported by those organizations that either support or provide the services.

The definition of the goals and the evaluation of the effects, naturally enough, depend a lot on the position of institutions that design and run the programs.

INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

By and large, we can state that governments are mainly interested in running economically oriented service programs and, to a limited extent, in building social capital. All three types of goals can be found behind civic service programs of the local nonprofit organizations. International organizations tend to offer humanitarian aid or launch programs targeted at civil society.

Governments have both direct and indirect influence on service programs. Lately, under some pressure created by the UN Recommendations and the actions related to The International Year of Volunteers (Pérez-Buck, 2001), important regulatory steps have been made to improve the legal environment.
of volunteering throughout the region (Giurgiu, 2001a, 2001b; Helbe, 2001; Kodym & Galinski, 2001; Stephens, 2001; Tutr, 2001). As far as the actual service delivery is concerned, government influence is overwhelming in the countries where democracy is less established and grassroots voluntary organizations are extremely weak.

Although state dominance is obviously weaker in the established democracies, a large part of the civic service programs are initiated by public authorities (see Table 1). The government is somehow behind all programs based on compulsion and most programs involving “stipended service” (Clotfelter, 2000). The majority of programs that offer quasi-service jobs to people who, for some reason, do not have access to real jobs in the labor market receive state support. Hungarian unemployed are obliged to regularly participate in civic service programs that are run by the municipalities, otherwise they are not eligible for unemployment benefit. The civilian service as an alternative to military service has appeared in several countries of the region after 1989 (Harrill, 2001a, 2001b; Panova et al., 2001), whereas the punishment-type manual work aimed to “remold the character” and the service required for the award of educational credit have never disappeared—only their legal background and practice changed a bit after 1989.

Unfortunately, under the conditions of general scarcity, even the non-profit organizations running completely compulsion-free services based on unpaid voluntary work may be dependent on government or foreign funding. As a consequence, probably a lot of them share the frustration expressed by an activist from Tajikistan: “NGOs are often effective in providing basic social services, but cannot afford the research projects and surveys necessary to determine their constituencies’ most urgent problems and needs. As a result, international donors determine activities, services and areas of focus” (USAID, 2002, p. 150). Nevertheless, local nonprofit organizations and churches run lots of civic service programs. Some of these programs are simply contracted out by government or municipalities, whereas many others complete state-run services or represent fully innovative, alternative approaches.

### Table 1. The Compulsion and Compensation Continua

| Characteristics | Compulsion | | |
|-----------------|------------|-----------------|
| | Yes | No |
| Compensation | Civic service as a condition for unemployment benefit | Transitory employment |
| Civic service as an alternative to military service | Atypical employment for disabled people |
| No | Civic service as a punishment of criminals | Organized regular voluntary work |
| Service required for the award of educational credit | |

![Table 1](http://nva.sagepub.com)
Voluntary work is a crucial element of these programs, but volunteering and civic service are not synonymous. Figure 2 is a rudimentary attempt to display to what extent they are overlapping.

The different size of circles suggests that Bell’s (2001) four models of volunteering (pp. 1-3) are not equally present in the region. Under state socialism, there was more room for the totalitarian “coercion model” of forced volunteering and “reciprocal model” of informal mutual help than for the charity-based “service delivery model,” not to mention the “multi-identity model” that allows for the choice of a wider, more inclusive path that calls for an active citizenship. The scope of the civic service is both larger and smaller than that of the voluntary service programs. It is smaller because it does not include
informal, ad hoc, and short-term volunteering. It is larger because of the inclusion of programs with some degree of compensation and compulsion that, therefore, are not regarded as volunteering by Eastern Europeans who have been sensitized to compulsion by their past experience.

CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

What is the difference between mandatory public work and civic service? The difference is nothing visible, if we only take a look at their forms, types, areas, or organizers. The key question is their recognition as of public benefit by the society. The Soviet-type mandatory public work definitely missed this legitimacy. It is an open question whether the civic service projects, a large part of which were organized from above and from outside, have significantly increased the level of legitimacy. My firm belief is that the projects involving truly voluntary actions and government/civil society partnership did.

However, for lack of survey evidence, this is only an impression. We know precious little about civic service in Eastern Europe and, especially, in Central Asia. What is worse, all we know is fragmentary and inconsistent. It is clear that civic service is present in the region; moreover, it is likely to play an important role in facing social and economic challenges. By contrast, it is weakly conceptualized and has not raised much research interest until now. The few research projects that have been carried out concentrated either on the nonprofit sector as a whole (mainly as local contributions to the Johns Hopkins project; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2001), or on giving and volunteering (Agency for the Non-Profit Sector & Civil Society Development Foundation, 2001; Anheier & Salamon, 2001; Czakó, Harsányi, Kuti, & Vajda, 1995; Davis Smith, 1998; Gaskin & Davis Smith, 1995; Giurgiu, 2001b; Loukianov & Mikhailova, 2001). Unfortunately, these projects, although most of them were somewhat modified versions of the surveys designed by Virginia Hodgkinson in the United States and Peter Halfpenny in the United Kingdom, did not produce comparable figures.

Civic service would merit much more and more sophisticated research. Cross-national studies seem to be especially important to discern the character of the civic service phenomenon and the role service programs play in economy and society. The “intuitive” social science should be replaced or, at least, completed by systematic empirical research and comprehensive multidisciplinary studies.

A major barrier to this kind of research is the civic service definition itself (Menon, Moore, & Sherraden, 2002). Because civic service overarches sectors and institutional forms (it is hosted by either governmental or private organizations), its empirical research can hardly be based on ordinary official statistics. Mapping its size and structure needs special surveys. For the purposes of
these surveys, the definition should be operationalized: We should precisely define how much time we mean by substantial engagement, what the indicators of social recognition are, and what the upper limit of the minimal compensation is. Cross-culturally, this will be an extremely difficult task.

As a first step, the bibliographic survey carried out by Perry and Imperial (2001) in the United States could be repeated in other regions, too. A largescale involvement of local researchers seems to be necessary because of the language difficulties. Operationalization of the working definition could follow this overview of the international literature.

Whenever the working definition is available, local researchers should explore all existing sources of information and report on their findings. Then, a thorough methodological work would be necessary to develop research techniques that are likely to produce consistent and comparable information on all aspects of civic service. This preparatory phase could also be used to locate and contact academics who are interested in related research topics and whose knowledge may enrich the project. It would be similarly important to contact policy makers and practitioners to learn about the questions they would expect to be answered.

Finally, beyond impressionistic accounts, we should gather systematic empirical data on civic service. A large scale comparative survey should be carried out, probably in cooperation with researchers who are interested in volunteering. It is hoped that Lyons, Wijkström, and Clary (1998) are right when they state that “it should be possible to collect data on volunteering—both narrowly defined and broadly defined—and on membership and other participatory activities, as well” (p. 53) in a single framework, based on an agreement that would set methodological standards for the survey. To bridge cultural and language gaps, to develop a common set of meticulously defined terms and a comprehensive research plan, to make elaborate preparations for the comparative survey, and then to strictly follow the mutually accepted rules of empirical work are the next steps we should take toward a better understanding of the real nature of civic service.

References


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