Civil society and ethnic segregation
The case of Latvia

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Abstract

In this paper two contrasting conceptions of civil society are explored, civil society as consolidating demos and civil society as public ethos. The main question is: Considering a society structured along ethnicity, what are the effects in terms of legitimacy and equal access to political means, given those two conceptions of civil society? The case of Latvia is used to expound this highly relevant question for former Soviet Eastern European states. Conclusively, the argument is, concerning Latvia, that the concept of civil society cannot be understood without including the ethnic dimension. Ethnicity is decisive given both models. Irrespective of defective civil society institutions in general, weak political structures may facilitate influence that might be quite large. This opportunity is unequally distributed due to ethnic affiliation.

Introduction

Notions of civility have been rekindled in the aftermath of the velvet revolution of former Soviet Eastern Europe. Political scientist studying recent social and political developments in these countries have emphasised the crucial role of civil society in supporting the establishment of democratic systems. In the present era of fundamental social and political transformation and institution building, the recreation or restructuring of a vital and thriving civil society– the public domain in juxtaposition to the state– is seen as a prerequisite goal in the process of establishing a functioning democratic order. But how do we define the concept of ‘civil society’ and what is its relationship to the state?

In this paper I seek to explore two broad conceptions of civil society and to consider how each understand the state – civil society relationship. Of particular interest to this paper is whether either of the two conceptions is able to specify adequately the conditions for the possibility of political participation by all citizens. Taking the particular case of Latvia into account, with its manifest ethnic divisions, I wish to argue that neither of these conceptions of civil society establishes conditions for effective participation, proper political understanding nor equal control of the political agenda.

In almost all of the Eastern European states there are political dimensions involving ethnic conflict potentialities. Some of the states accommodate minorities with a long tradition within the territory. Other minorities are newcomers reflecting migration due to state conflicts and boundary drawings in recent times. The case of Latvia is an extremely ethnically mixed society. Almost half of the population, approximately 45% are estimated as belonging to the Slavic minority. The majority of them are new settlers who were sent to Latvia from other Soviet republics in the post-war period. The Latvian society is even a segregated society, which is reflected partly in territorial residence of minorities, partly in social position in society. The territory of modern Latvia has historically been ethnically mixed, inhabited by, besides Latvians: Germans, Russians, Poles and Jews, to name the largest minorities. There is a tradition of a vigorous, ethnically based, civil society in Latvia, interrupted by the Soviet era. But although Latvia has been counted among democracies for almost two decades of the interwar period, it was hardly a democracy in the Western sense of the word. There is no
question of “Return to the Western world” in the case of Latvia or the other Baltic states, although this is the picture often given. (Lauristin & Vihalemm, 1997)

How do these circumstances affect the outcomes in terms of the prospects for a functioning civility? My examples are mainly picked out from the sector of education, because education and schooling gives the most clear and pregnant perspectives on the relation between the state and civility. In education policy, the states most eager ambitions are shown, in terms of fostering its conception of civility on society. The sphere of education is also a salient domain when it comes to organising and institutionalising civil society interests in juxtaposition to state policy.

Two conceptions of civil society

The literature on civil society presents a highly theorised domain focused on outlining fields of complication rather than giving definite answers and definitions. However, it is possible and relevant, for my purposes, to start with a distinction between two rough and briefly outlined ideal types or models. There is the model of civil society as consolidating demos and the model of civil society as public ethos. None of them should be applied promptly to reality or used in analyses without qualification. Both of them must be discussed in relation to assumptions about the functioning of the state.¹

The model of civil society as consolidating demos suggests a positive link between an active and engaged society and democracy.² Civil society is popular control, a guarantee against the misuse of state power. The state, democratic or not, is always inclined to generate an interest of its own. The mission of civil society is to check state power and keep control on state elitism, nepotism or corruption. The democratic inclination of the civil, either manifested in voluntary organisations, popular movements, unions or private enterprises, is often assumed.

In this model civil society is the determinant of a healthy democracy.³ On the other hand, lack of civility means misgivings concerning the survival of democratic institutions on state level in the long run. Civil society is not just a check against state power misuse, it is a prerequisite for democracy.

Of course, this model allows for very different conceptions of the limits and definitions of the civil as well as the characterisation of the state to be checked or balanced. It incorporates both a traditional liberal and a post-Marxist project.⁴

In a liberal tradition, within a liberal project, civil society is an answer to the illiberal an elitist aspects of modern democracy, either be it populist or elitist. (Cohen & Arato, 1995, p 86) Civil society might be expressed in terms of pluralism restricting the domain of state power. It might be understood as a network of overlapping interests favourable to a stable democracy. (Walzer 1995, Keane 1988) The economy and the market might be included in civility, or it

¹ See for example Skapska in Fine (ed) (1997) for an outline of two conceptions of civil society.
² The source of this model in the history of ideas is first and foremost the Tocquevillean conception of a civility composed by face-to-face democracy and small-scale local organisations. (See for example Ehrenberg, 1999)
³ See for example Hall (1998) for an historical perspective on the occurrence of civil society and democracy in Western Europe. See also Gellner (1994)
might be limited to social and/or political activity from below, that is organised interests independent of the state.

Actually, whether to include private enterprising and market economy in the concept of civility or not is a central question of debate in the recent civil society discourse. Civil society as the free market containing potentialities of reform of the political order belongs to one of the most common positions in deliberating on the problems of post-communist Europe. But the opposite conception is to be found as well. Priban & Young for example, argues that “[t]he principles of a civil society must be understood as the necessary supplement and counterweight to the market economy” in the process of transformation. (Priban & Young, 1999)

Understood as a concept of post-Marxist or post-gramcian source the stress should rather be on civil society as an arena for complicating the all-embracing state concept. The focus is on popular movements and solidarity rather than on organised interests. Where to ultimately place economy, in the state domain or in the domain of civility, depends on perceptions of the characteristics of post-capitalism. In modern discourse, post-Marxism is often substituted by the concept of radical democracy, which means extension of the practise of democratic principles to all permeate all possible aspects of social life.

Popular fronts leading the overturn of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the late 80th gave an almost metaphorical illustration to civil society as consolidating demos. Grass-root movements dismissing and overturning the regime might be seen as an indicator of the democratising potentialities of civil society in Eastern Europe. But in terms of measures of democratisation, such as for example, confidence in democratic system and participation in general elections the results hardly showed up in the long run. According to Skapska (1997) civil society as democratisation from below “loses its explanatory and normative potential when applied to phenomena occurring after the collapse of communism, that is, to the growing fundamental conflicts within society, social disintegration, the visible privatisation of public life, the legal nihilism, and the ever more present norms of ‘dirty togetherness’”. Analogically, the popular distrust in democracy could be understood as having something to do with the lack of civility.

The second ideal type, civil society as public ethos, is concerned with the legitimising functions of civility. This model stresses the link between the state and civil society. A democratic state is built on certain morals, norms and a consciousness that ought to be affected throughout society. The democratic state is the prerequisite for a healthy civil society by means of supplying with human rights and freedoms and public openness.

Within this model, ideally civil society is a reflection of the democratic regime, and thereby it also serves as the arena for legitimising and supporting state policy. There is a link between political institutions and society that rather goes in the other direction than that in the model outlined above. Civil society is not supposed to be opposed to the state; rather civility is defined within the state.

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5 See Lively & Reeve for an ideological background to this debate.
6 See for example the standard work of Cohen, Class and Civil Society.
7 See Arato (1981) for a parallel discussion concerning the consolidation of the Solidarity movement in Poland in the early 80ties.
The source of civil society as public ethos is to be found in the classical conception of civility. The distinction goes between the civil, within the state and the uncivil, outside the state. "The classical view of civil society identified it with the politically organised commonwealth and regarded state power as the indispensable guarantor of civilization’s benefits.” (Ehrenberg, 1999) In pre-Hobbesian writing organised political power is an indispensable condition for a decent and ordinary social life. The state is the guarantor of order, stability or moral in society, although the degree of separation between state and civility as analytical concepts might differ in content and degree. When it comes to modern societies the application of classical theories rather put the values of human rights, equality and liberty more in focus at the expense of stability and order. Generally, democracy and stability are understood as interdependent values.

The application of this model for post-communist democracies under development is not obvious. It might be stated that democratic institutions have to be developed and consolidated before there is any relevance of discussing the concept of civil society in the actual context. Alternatively, there might be a turn towards the more classical conception. The importance of civil society does not lie in legitimising democratic institutions but rather in the guarantee of order and stability as distinct from the former.  

Generally, the model of civil society as consolidating demos is concerned with the creation of relevant civil society institutions. The undergrowth of social networks and organisations on different levels of society are prosperous to the growth of democracy. In relevant civil society organisations, differing and overlapping opinions and interests could be articulated and then canalised into the political system. To speak in terms of the market versus the state, the economic order has to be defined and consolidated. The focus is on finding the optimal institutional setting.

Civil society as public ethos, on the other hand, is concerned rather with values and processes than with institutions. Reconstructing civil society is reconstructing a certain foundation of values and norms. Of course, in requiring certain arrangements such as constitutions and laws in order to create favourable circumstances for civil society to prosper, there is a focus on institutional prerequisites. But the democratic fostering of society might or might not be gained by a certain organisational setting.

But the concern for values does occur even in civil society consolidating demos via a discussion on different types of civil society organisations. Within the model the understanding of civil society as advantageous per se is challenged by an argument holding that there is not just civil society but even “uncivil” societies. The focus is gliding over from civil society as institutions to civil society as bearer of certain values. Actually civil society, or parts of it could be the plant school of undemocratic and unethical values and norms. It might even be the case that parts of society are irrelevant in a project of democratisation. Engagement in sport clubs can’t be compared to the business of workers unions. There are qualitative differences between different types of organising.  

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8 For civil society and social stability, see McConnell (1966): The significance of local organisations lies in “the guarantee of stability and the enforcement of order rather than in support for the central values of a liberal society” (p 6)

9 For analytical purposes this presuppose, of course, a sharp distinction between the civil and the political system. The civil society discourse reflects both the difficulties in doing this separation as well as different perspectives due to different academic state theory traditions.

Although those two ideal types might be analytically separated it is plausible that no one is more adequate than the other when it comes to reality, in literature they are in fact often mixed. The second model civil society as public ethos stresses the link between state and society in a top-bottom perspective. It is obvious that the civil is at least partly a product of the actual regime. The historical examples are many of states producing and reproducing ideologies as means of legitimising state projects, democratic or not. Popular movements legitimising nationalistic endeavours might be the clearest example. Civil societies in democratic states may serve as guardians of desirable values in terms of minimising the scoop for populist and elitist movements. But how do we actually measure the congruence in values and norms between state and society. And what comes first, how do we measure the direction of influence?

It is equally relevant to call attention to the fact that civil societies do often serve democracy by checking or balancing state power as it is suggested by the model of civil society as consolidating demos. Here, the problem of measurement is of another character. How do we analytically make the civil distinct from the political sphere? The problems of measurement are part of the explanation to the poor results in applying the concept of civil society in empirical investigation.

With those complications in mind I move on to the main question of this paper. What does ethnic division or segregation mean in those different models? Given the model of civil society as public ethos it might mean two things depending on the comprehension of the distinction between the civic and the nation as an ethnic community. If the legitimacy of the system just refers to the civic, if it is possible to separate civic, democratic virtues from national/ethnic ones, there might be no problem. The model is for example compatible with a civil society build on plurality as organised ethnic sub-communities. If it is not possible to sort out the civic sphere from the national, as is suggested by for example Yack (1998), it is more problematic. The model of civil society as public ethos might then be a recommendation to assimilation of minorities into the majority culture.

Even given the model of civil society as consolidating demos there seems to be different possibilities. According to Walzer liberals have traditionally been “ready enough to acknowledge a plurality of interests” but “strikingly unready for a plurality of cultures”. (Walzer 1996) It is no logic saying that pluralism in culture as organised interests couldn’t work in favour of democracy. But it “may prove to be not one but several societies – all occupying the same territory and polity, but organising interests and passions into communities that are ethnically, linguistically or culturally distinct – even exclusive”. (Whitehead, 1996) Mobilising demos might be mobilising just not one but several demos in potential conflict with each other. Interests may not be overlapping, but contrary.

It is interesting to confront institutions, as this concept is comprehended in the first model civil society consolidating demos with values and norms as they are comprehended in the second model civil society public ethos. In other word what are the civil virtues imposed by the state and how are they linked to a segregated society based on ethnic affiliation. To put it another way, how is a society based on ethnic stratification coping with the conception of civility given by the political regime.

11 See also for example Greenfeld (1993) for discussion
The case of Latvia

In the post-war period the ethnic composition of the Latvian territory was altered in a drastic sense caused by immigration from Russia and other Soviet republics. Today the ethnic Latvians are estimated to approximately 56% of the population, 44% are understood as belonging to ethnic minorities. Approximately 80% of the latter are new settlers on the Latvian territory due to coerced migration during the time of Soviet domination. This should be compared to the ethnic composition in the country during the interwar, democratic, period. Latvians was a majority of 77%. The largest minority groups were Russians estimated to 9%, Germans 3%, Jew 5% and Poles 3%. (Dreifelds 1996 p 142ff)

The expression “understood as belonging to” is preferred instead of just “belong to” because categorisation is not a straightforward and clear-cut task in this context. Language does not exhaust the content of categories; to a large degree categories also mirror an ethno-social discourse. Categories are modelled on certain characteristics that are comprehended as essential and distinctive. As will be seen, the underlying understanding of boundaries and distinctions in society is important in the very conception of the civil in the Latvian society.

Categorisation decides who is in and who is out, and in that respect it is also a question of power. By power is meant, in this context, rather the utilisation of ancient preconceived ideas and prejudice than overt exercising of power means. Categorisation often works in favour of the majority population and to the disadvantage of the ethnic minorities.

In Latvian popular parlance the understanding of ethnicity is strongly related to social characteristics. Those characteristics do not always work in favour of Latvians, but they are an important underpinning for the argument on a separated society. As a remnant from Russian domination during the Communist period the difference between the Latvian and the Russian, or the Slavic, is often described in a list of dichotomies obviously overloaded with prejudices. To be Latvian is to be accustomed to be governed. To be Russian is to aim for power. Russian is to be outward looking. Latvian is to be inward looking. Russian is industrious and ambitious. Latvian is to be satisfied with what turns up. Latvian is concern for culture and folklore. Russian is concern for business. Russian is cosmopolitanism. Latvian is localism. Russian is urban. Latvian is agrarian, and so on and so forth. In one way this type of reasoning is not distinct from the junk of fishy statements, pressing the limit of racism, as they may occur in any country. But it also represents a way of understanding society as in its very essence composed by ethno-social subunits, not by individuals.

Irrespective of who was in the possession of power, Germans, Swedes or Russians, the Latvian society had up to the annexation of Latvia in the Soviet Union 1944 been a segregated society along ethnic lines. Different ethnic groups had their specific social attributes. As a rule social prosperity was decided by ethnic affiliation. Sometimes ethnicity was decided by social status. During the 19th century up till the First World War, to be German meant to be landowner or merchant, in other word to be socially and economically prosperous. To be Russian meant to be in the state government, or as was the case in the Eastern part of Latvia to be worker. To be Latvian meant to be farm worker. Ethnicity and social position did
coincide almost perfectly. If you were Latvian and had the opportunity to climb the social ladder, it was not unusual that you changed or modified your name to a German one.\(^{12}\)

Literature and prose of the time give a picture of the organic character of the perception of society, with ethnicity understood as a central building block. Probably, Latvia did not sort out from other pre-democratic societies within contemporary Eastern European empires in this respect. But remarkably, Latvia, and Estonia as well, maintained the organic conception of society and tried to conceal it with the construction of democracy in the interwar period. As one of few independent Eastern European states after the First World War, Latvia established a democratic system. But, contrary to what might be expected, ethnicity as a linchpin in the organisation of society was strengthened rather than weakened during the period of democracy 1920-1933.

The parliamentary system, constructed on the model of Weimar, was to a large extent based on parties organised after ethnicity. Approximately, 1/5 of the deputies in the Seima (Latvian parliament) had their mandate from minority parties. Probably even more important, a system of separate ethnic schools was in practise. In Latvia, the rights and duties of the schools were regulated in detail in common laws. The minority school system was mainly funded with public means.

The school system was not absolutely closed; it was possible for parents of one ethnic affiliation to send their children to schools of other ethnic adherence. The German schools, for example, lacked pupils from one time to another and sometimes welcomed mobility. Some Latvian children went to German schools and many Jewish children went to Russian schools. That is, ethnic division was so deeply related to social prosperity that linguistic ethnicity sometimes was neglected. Around the minority schools an ethnically based civil society was growing. It consisted of parents’ organisations, teachers unions and other interest groups.

Apart from school policy, there was another feature of the interwar democratic state policy that has to be highlighted in order to understand the Latvian situation of today. Probably the confiscation of land, that was effectuated immediately after the independence, is still determining for the ethno-demographic situation in the country. The German nobility owned more than half of the cultivated land in the country. In order to equalise the society, the German estates were confiscated. The land was redistributed mainly to Latvian small farmer.\(^{13}\) Hope (1996, p 48) sees the land reform as a decisive factor in explaining the poor support for communism in the national election of 1928 and as the promotion of pro-western values in Latvia. I think it is relevant to rather stress the confirmation of a traditionalist value system in this context. It is probable that the land reform contributed to a setback in the modernisation of the country. In connection with the contemporary Romanian land reform Chirot (1998) pronounces the inconsistence between preserving and consolidating the pre-modern, agrarian and modern political forms.

The main part of Latvians today live on the countryside or in small towns, while Russians are dominant in the seven biggest cities. As regards to Latvians, urbanisation has never occurred the way it did in other countries. Instead the urban settlers came from abroad, from near and distant Soviet republics. A large part of the Latvian society, in Latvia, continued to be agrarian, which also, quite often meant stuck to old pre-modern, organic conceptions of

\(^ {12}\) See for example Svabe (1961), Balodis (1990)

\(^ {13}\) See for example Ward(1996), Hope (1996).
society. When looking upon modern Latvia and its conception of civility it is necessary to have this situation in mind.

The ideal picture of a harmonious little community inhabited by citizens engaged in different businesses and occupying different functions in society is still popular in the minds of Latvians. All aspects of society are personified and nobody is excluded or forgotten. But this picture is based on a historical conception of society that is no longer valid. Today there is a large part of society, the Soviet Russians, which does not fit in.

According to the model of civil society as public ethos the school sector is a central arena for state ambitions, in the endeavour to reproduce for the state central values and morals. It is the domain where values and perceptions in congruence with state doctrines are reproduced and fostered into young generations. In democracies, cherished values such as individuality, freedom, equality, responsible citizenship and tolerance use to be reflected in programmatic declarations, patterns of organisation and curricula.

In Latvia this is not exactly the case. Values such as individuality an individual responsibility are honoured by the regime in public contexts. But they are not the ones dominating in the cluster of values understood as important in fostering younger generations. The National standard of compulsory education in Latvia rather reflects widespread perceptions of the benefits of separation. It is permeated with formulations on the need of promoting and encouraging an identity based on ethnicity and language. The program is build upon differences; it is based on cultural separation and segregation rather than on integration. The ethnic is regarded as the underpinning of civic virtues.

The concern for moving away from the Soviet conception of a good citizen is clear, but there is even a tendency to avoid the assumption of the equal and independent individual so central in the Western conception of a democratic society. Remarkably, it is not just the Latvian culture but culture and ethnicity in general that is honoured.

Separation as a program is effectuated in the divided school system. As a rule Latvian children go to Latvian schools and Russian children go to Russian schools. There are no laws forbidding Russian children to go to Latvian schools, in fact many Russian parents want to send their children to Latvian schools. But Russians simply cannot be found there. Different local regulations and instructions on language skills sort them out. Sometimes such regulations are in practise against the law. Few Latvian children cannot be found in Russian schools either. But that is less strange since the Russian schools are in so much poorer conditions than the Latvian. Partly the segregation has to do with experiences of history. Segregation is described as a guarantee of equality, an opportunity for each ethnic group to develop their specific characteristics. Many Latvians understand mixed schools, as an instrument of oppression in the name of one ethnic group. Mixed schools have been in practise for barely 50 years of Soviet rule.

Separation might be no problem as long as there is an equal access to ethnicity. As long as honouring ethnic values does not mean exclusion of divergent ethnic affiliations it is compatible with the ideal state of things within a model of civil society as public ethos. A traditionalist conception of society might have been compatible with democracy during the

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14 Ex Izskats mazpilsetaa, produced by Latvian Adult Education Association.
15 Russian as an ethnic category has acquired an acceptance in society through historic attendance. This group is nevertheless a minority of the Russian population.
16 See National Standards of Compulsory Education, Ministry of Education and Science
first democracy, 1920-33. But there is clear evidence that it does not apply to the Russian new-settlers of recent times. Civility belongs to the one who has the entitlement by history or tradition. Access to citizenship is an irrelevant factor in this context.

What are the prospects of the Russian newcomers within the model of civil society as consolidating demos? Statistics and studies present us with figures that indicate the bad conditions of the civil society in the Eastern European countries. Neither regarding the level of organisational affiliation and nor trust in the democratic regimes the situation are encouraging. The picture holds for Latvia as well, although the figures vary in different studies. Approximately 15% of the population mentions membership in non-governmental organisations when asked in surveys. About a fourth of the Latvian population, 26% are engaged in social organisations, compared to just 12% of the Russian. As will be discussed below, partly the figures are insecured because it is not evident how to measure social or non-governmental organisation.

There is a marked difference between the engagement of Latvians compared to Russians, and the gap has widened since the mobilisation in the late 80ties and early 90ties. In fact the Russian minority including the new settlers of the post-war era used to be very active in the Popular front movement. As stated by Karklins “one should note that a sizable segment of the non-Latvian population has supported movements focusing on Latvia” (Karklins, 1994, p 82). The activity in the Latvian society at large was very intense and the situation today shows a total decline. But the decline is far more significant when it comes to the Russian minority than regarding Latvians. When the extra-ordinary activities of the conversion of society had to be turned into ordinary organisational activity the ethnic minorities opted out. Partly, this can be explained by the status of non-citizenship that affected the overwhelming majority of the Russians. Non-citizenship disentitled to participation in party politics. Probably this factor contributed to disengagement just not in politics but in all kinds of social activity.

Given the proposition that civil society adds something essential to democracy in terms of checking state policy those figures are not encouraging. From the model of civil society as consolidating demos, it is obviously a problem if demos are divided into a number of demos promoting incompatible interests and conceptions. But what happens if parts of the society, for ethnic reasons, are excluded from the social life of organisations. Both the liberal idea on pluralist interest representation and radical democracy presuppose that civility has to be spread fairly equal across society otherwise its function as the guarantor of democracy is wasted. But as indicated above the overall figures are so relatively small that they must be regarded to over-shadowing any ethnic differences.

To get the complete picture we have to add the characteristics of a segregated society. From a civil society point of view the segregation of school children also means separation of parents’ organisations, teachers’ organisations and organisations engaged in questions of schooling. Latvian parent organisations are very active, especially in schools to which children of prosperous and wealthy families attend. Parents not only give social support but also financial support to the schools. In fact, education on ground level is just one example of a sector that works in the direction of separation within the civil society. Generally Latvians and Russians do not attend to the same organisations. In the, due to the extensive international support, quite developed sector of adult education the segregation is extremely marked. There is a network of Latvian adult education organisations, many of them explicitly engaged in

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17 UNDP report 1996.
educating an active and responsible citizenship. The attendance of Russians to those courses fails. There is no Russian adult education to talk about, with the exception Latvian training courses.

In Latvia the gravest problem related to equal access is the fact that the boundary between state and civil society is blurred. In fact, in many cases it is highly disputable whether to regard an organisation as within or outside the state policy domain. The state administration is highly visible within the life of organisations. Special interests are formulated within state administration. “Non-governmental” Latvian organisations have direct access to the state at different levels. The lack of autonomy of non-governmental organisations according to interpersonal overlap has been pointed out. “Curiously, representatives of national and local government agencies are involved in the leadership of around a third of the organisations”18. “In regional centres, smaller towns and rural districts, local government remain the primary force behind social activity”.19 There are frequently occurring types of semi-governmental organisation with aims on the agenda to put pressure on the government.20 Just Latvian organisations are concerned.

For the model of civil society as consolidating demos, in our case that is democratisation from below this fact presents a problem. The model demands an independent organisational structure. If ethnic affiliation is added as a decisive factor discriminating between the organisations linked and not linked to the state, we have a problem of equality as well. The access to the utilities gained by the link to the state administration is unequally spread due to ethnic affiliation.

Within a society such as Latvia, which is programmatically divided along ethnic lines, ethnicity is a question of entitlement to identity. But it is also a question of political interests. Ideally, the rights and regulations of for example the use of minority language in public dealings ought to be decided via democratic decisions on state level after appropriate political considerations. The Latvian case here presents us with another example of diffuse borders between the establishment of state policy and special interests. For example the academy in cooperation with different pro-national organisations has an unwarranted role in those matters.

Language policy represents an arena for indignant disputes in almost every multiethnic country. One of the questions on the agenda in the Latvian parliament in recent times has been the question of the use of state language contra minority languages. The focus is on deciding in which forums the use of the Latvian language should be decreed. Curiously, the main actors in this game are not the political parties. The language question is not a distinct question in parliament, it is an object of bargaining and turned tables. Instead there is the academy i.e. the higher education institutions, in alliance with different semi-governmental organisations that is the driving force.

18 UNDP report 1996
19 UNDP report 1997
20 Se for example Latvian Adult Education Association. Within this umbrella organisation a variety of different non-governmental, governmental and semi-governmental organisations and institutions are represented. None of them are minority organisations. One of the aims of the organisation is to put pressure on the government and administration in questions regarding adult education. LAEA is financed by international money and founded by German educational organisations.
Contrary to a model presupposing the academy as a sector of independence and integrity, the Latvian academy acts as one of the main constructors behind state policy. But the academy also represents a special interest. The boundaries between civil society as articulation of special interests and state policy is made indistinct by allowing the academy to act as a distinctive pressure group.  

A link of dependence between governmental policy and activity within the academy might be regarded as a sign of an immature democracy. Government making the business of the academy as a business of its own is one of the characteristics of authoritarian political systems. But the case of Latvia should rather be apprehended the other way around. The formation and articulation of interests within the academy substitute the weak and imperfect functioning of the articulation of interests on the political level, in government and in parliament.

This, of course presents a problem to both models presented above. It means that the articulation of interests, in this case, hardly can be understood as a concern for ordinary people at all, neither Latvians nor Russians. But the fact is that the academy has strong support within broad sequences of the Latvian society. Both equality in access to influence and legitimacy within the Russian segment are diminished.

Conclusions

The lack of a civil society is generally seen as one of the main problems in the recently independent Eastern European states. I think the case of Latvia should be presented in a slightly different way. Civil society must be looked upon as a relative concept, its impact and importance is partly decided by the shape of the political system at large. Available figures show a scant political engagement by Latvians, but given the weak political structures the influence might be quite large. Moreover, concerning Latvia one has to include the concept of ethnicity in the analysis of civil society and democracy. Exactly because of the weak of political structure ethnicity turns out to be decisive.

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21 The language policy is in fact to a large extent raised by the Department of Sociolinguistics at University of Latvia. A lot of policy documents are produced by professors within the department. The recently established Latvian Academy of Culture is engaged in a similar mission. One of the aims of this department, situated at Latvian university, is support and reproduction of Latvian cultural values.
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