



Country Profile: Hungary

Civil Society in Hungary: History and Background

Taking the lead as the first Soviet Bloc country to open its borders in 1989, Hungary began its campaign against communism, implementing a variety of economic and political liberalization reforms that have since carried the nation to full parliamentary democracy. With its progressive economy and burgeoning democratic political system, Hungary gained entry into NATO in 1999 and the European Union (EU) in 2004. Although the country has at times faced many of the issues common among formerly communist nations, including recession, unemployment, thriving black markets, political corruption, and an outdated social infrastructure, during its market transition “Hungary developed the healthiest and most progressive economy in the former Soviet Bloc, a factor that helped facilitate political reform.”ⁱⁱ

The collapse of communism in Hungary and the transition to free markets also had important impacts on public perceptions about citizenship and civic participation. While public opinion of politics remains damaged by scandals, the end of communism gave rise to a growing civil society, with increased participation in community and voluntary organizations, especially among adults. By 1996, about two-thirds of Hungarian NGOs were voluntary associations – with a combined total of 5.5 million members – and 40% of nonprofits relied on volunteers to carry out their operations.ⁱⁱ In 2000, over 400,000 volunteers provided almost 35.5 million hours of work to nonprofit organizations in Hungary, the equivalent efforts of 17,000 full time employees.ⁱⁱⁱ

Country Facts: Hungary

Population: 10 million (CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, 2006)

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Median Age: 38.7 years (CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, 2006)

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Youth Unemployment Rate: 13.4% (UNDP, 2006)

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Most Pressing Youth Concern: The Spread of Drug Use (YOUTH2004)

Seeking to advance the development of civil society organizations, the Hungarian government has enacted several major laws benefiting nonprofit organizations and volunteers. To support the work of local nonprofits, Parliament passed the “1% Law” in 1996, allowing taxpayers to designate 1% of their personal income tax payments for donation to a registered NGO.^{iv} Donations have grown steady since the law’s enactment, totaling about 6.1 billion forints (\$26.5

million US) of revenues in 2003.^v More recently, the 2005 Law on Public Interest Volunteer Activities defines volunteering and lays out protections to ensure safe working conditions for volunteers. While the law is an important step in recognizing volunteers and conferring on them some of the rights and protections of paid employment, it is limited in scope by restrictions on the type of host organizations eligible.^{vi} As more Hungarians engage with civil society in the post-communist period, stronger legal protections for their service could help grow a greater culture of volunteerism.

Youth in Hungary’s Civil Society

Although adult participation in Hungarian civil society is growing, youth engagement remains more limited. Compulsory participation in youth organizations such as the Little Drummers, the Pioneers and the Communist Youth Party during the communist period soured many young people and their parents on volunteerism, creating a backlash and resulting in youth alienation from civil society. Especially among those who lived through it, the lasting memory of how some volunteer organizations were co-opted and nationalized by the state continues to discourage would-be participants. With the opening up of civil society and the expansion of the NGO sector

in Hungary, many groups have formed to serve the needs of youth, but few have been formed with the goal of engaging youth in serving their own communities.^{vii}

In this negative climate for voluntary youth groups and vacuum of support for those wishing to serve, few young people report membership in any kind of civil association. Youth2004, a recent study of young people conducted by the Hungarian Ministry of Youth, Family and Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, found that only 15% of respondents were members of a civil, social, political, religious, charity, sport, or cultural organization, community, club, or circle. The majority of young people with no memberships indicated having a lack of interest, 39%, or lack of time, 36%, pointing to the large degree of isolation between young Hungarians and civil society. When asked about their biggest concerns, Hungarian youth placed the spread of drugs at the top of their list (41%), followed by unemployment (18%) and a “future without prospects” (17%).^{viii} These concerns speak to the larger question of young people’s place in contemporary Hungarian society, as youth correctly perceive that their skills and potential are not being recognized or nurtured enough by the existing social structures.

National Youth Service

After a 15 year absence of national service programs following the collapse of communism in Hungary, the national government is working to build youth policy and service programs to address the needs, concerns and motivations of today’s young people. In 2004, the national Ministry of Youth, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities was reconfigured to govern both youth policy and initiatives related to the growing drug problem, which was recognized as a critical youth issue. Moving beyond policies that only serve youth, Hungary recently began ÖTLET, the first national program to address the engagement of youth in service of their own communities.

ÖTLET

Initiated in 2005, the ÖTLET Program is a pilot national youth service scheme with coordinating organizations in each of Hungary’s eight regions. ÖTLET, or “idea”, is also a Hungarian acronym for “Volunteer, Activity, Opportunity, Employment, Experience”, which describes the program’s main functions and objectives. Organized and funded through the Hungarian Ministry of Employment and the National Employment Fund, ÖTLET uses national service as a tool to address high youth unemployment, enrolling 18-26 year old participants for 10 month service projects. ÖTLET participants receive training and support from the national and regional agencies, but carry out their work with nonprofit organizations located throughout the country. While most projects are carried out locally, with participants remaining in their own communities to conduct their work, opportunities to work in more distant areas of the country also exist for volunteers wishing to travel. The program provides an opportunity for struggling young people to gain professional experience, build skills and become engaged in community issues. By providing these opportunities to young people, the ÖTLET program is optimistic about the potential of national service to reintegrate youth into civil society and address an expanding array of issues in Hungary.^{ix}

Mobilitas

Engaging youth in service on an international level, Mobilitas is the state controlled and financed agency tasked with implementing the European Commission’s Youth Programme in Hungary. The Youth Programme, which began in 2000, works with 15 to 25 year old residents of European Union (EU) member states to create opportunities for mobility and active participation in the progress and integration of Europe. Through the Youth Programme, young people can serve abroad for up to one year as part of the European Volunteer Service (EVS) within or outside of Europe, working on a variety of community issues including social, environmental, cultural, technological or educational needs.^x

Implementing this program in Hungary, Mobilitas works in conjunction with EVS to engage young Hungarians age 18 to 26 in intensive voluntary service on projects. The agency also contains an Information Service which produces and disseminates materials on youth policy

development. Through this service, Mobilitas has published large-scale surveys of youth issues in Hungary, including the Youth2004 survey cited above, as well as research on young Hungarian nationals living in the near-abroad, a monthly newsletter, and other reports on national and international youth policy developments.^{xi}

Youth Organizations in Hungary

Foundation for Democratic Youth (DIA)

As a premier youth service organization, the nonprofit Foundation for Democratic Youth (DIA) works to build a youth service infrastructure to engage 14-25 year olds in service throughout Hungary and Europe. The foundation gives grants, conducts trainings, organizes conferences and exchanges and lobbies government agencies to promote youth service, strengthening civil society by increasing youth civic engagement and nurturing leadership skills through the service. DIA's work focuses mainly on the fields of civic education and community service programming, service-learning, teacher training, advocacy, and youth employment, often working with partner organizations who host volunteers. Almost all DIA-supported programs are located in the countryside, reaching young people in over 50 towns with the help of the Nokia Corporation, the General Electric Foundation, and the Hungarian Labor Ministry, their three largest funders. As of 2002, 609 DIA volunteers were providing a total of 62,006 service hours to their communities annually. With a three year grant from the General Electric Foundation to support youth employability through skills development in rural areas, DIA is also training at-risk teens for 10 month public service internships, giving them the opportunity to participate in decision-making and gain professional experience.^{xii}

Conclusion

Hungary continues the struggle to pass from one period in its history to another, still trying to heal the remaining scars of communism while growing into a modern capitalistic democracy. As the nation underwent its rapid transition in political and economic systems, young people were among the hardest hit, resulting in their widespread withdrawal from civil society and participation in government. The newly open society allowed an NGO sector to blossom in Hungary, but youth remained largely excluded from the picture until recently. Currently, the government and private organizations are stepping up to mobilize youth in service of their own communities through a new national youth service pilot program and other local and international initiatives. If these programs are successful, they could go a long way in reversing youth alienation from civic life and preparing young people to live productive lives as active participants and leaders in the development of their own society.

ICP would like to thank Richard Harrill at Youth Service International, András F. Toth at the Hungarian National Volunteer Centre, Attila Kaszás and Hayo de Vries of the Foundation for Democratic Youth, Dr. Peter Futo at Mixolid Consultancy, John Stringham at Ecumenical Diaconal Year Network, and all others who provided assistance in researching this article.

ⁱ Harrill, Richard. "Youth Service in Hungary." Paper presented at Worldwide Workshop on Youth Involvement as a Strategy for Social, Economic and Democratic Development, San Jose, Costa Rica. January 4-7, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Statistical Findings on the Nonprofit Sector." Central Statistical Office.

<<http://www.nonprofit.hu/english/kiadvanyoktanulmanyok.html>>

^{iv} Civil Society International. <<http://www.civilsoc.org/>>

^v "Percentage Philanthropy." <http://www.onepercent.hu/perc_phil.htm>

^{vi} "CEV News." European Volunteer Centre. Issue 36, September 2005.

^{vii} Harrill, Richard.

^{viii} "Youth2004." A publication of the Ministry of Youth, Social and Family Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2005. <http://www.mobilitas.hu/fajlok/kutatas/10/YOUTH2004_research_report.pdf>

^{ix} ÖTLET Program. <www.otletprogram.hu>

^x "User's Guide: Youth Programme." European Commission. January 1, 2005.

<http://ec.europa.eu/youth/index_en.html>

^{xi} Mobilitas. <<http://www.mobilitas.hu/?m=97&lang=en>>

^{xii} Foundation for Democratic Youth. <<http://vip.i-dia.org/main.php>>