

Zdenka Mansfeldová and Aleš Kroupa (Eds.): Participation and Interest Group Organisations in the Czech Republic

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The publication aims to examine interest organisations in the context of civil participation, political as well as non-political representation of interests in the Czech Republic, but also in post-Communist conditions and countries.

Although the authors of this book maintain the complexity of their approach, in the light of the great number of organisations and various forms of defending their interests, they have narrowed their focus and concentrated mainly on collective actors and the legislative framework, within which the surveyed processes of mediating interests and civil participation take place.

The very structure of the publication bears evidence of the complex approach: individual chapters gradually describe the evolution of the constitutional framework and legal regulation of interests' representation in the Czech Republic after 1989, moving on to democratisation of government, which they examine by looking at new ways of governing and the changing relationship between public administration and citizens, while later chapters include analyses of the individual segments of basic organised interests – mainly civil non-for-profit organisations within the third sector, employees' associations (trade unions) and employers and interest associations of local self-governments.

Authors investigate all these organisations and associations in the context of civil participation, which they define as participation of citizens in social processes – decision-making as well as social and political activities. In this respect, it is symptomatic that the authors dedicated an extra chapter to analysing the causes of low membership of political parties or that they associate this and the decrease in organised membership with non-political collective players (trade unions for example). It is thus logical that the presented publication goes on to outline alternative forms of participation and their development in the Czech Republic, as well as grounds for membership or non-membership in organisations and interest associations. The authors contemplate the anticipated advantages and disadvantages citizens associate with their formal membership in the observed organisations and describe these from the point of view of their organisation, but also bearing in mind the pros and cons they bring to their members.

Several essential findings of the authors can be applied to conditions in Slovakia as well as to the other post-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

When the authors of the first chapter, *Petr Kollár* and *Jindřiška Syllová* describe the legal environment in the Czech Republic after 1993, they point out a rather high degree of instability of the legal order. This was at first related with

ongoing democratisation, later with changes occurring during the process of the Czech accession to the EU. Authors critically reflect on some basic characteristics of current Czech constitutional and legal order – for example, the extensive interpretation of the so-called „law exclusivity“ principle. This is an application of an article of the Czech constitution, which states that legal obligations can only be imposed exclusively by means of laws. According to authors this leads to the parliament becoming a „law factory“ whose laws contain unnecessary detailed norms rather than vital political decisions. This in turn has a negative effect on the number of discussed and passed acts, as well as the necessity of frequent amendments. Equally critical is authors' assessment of the often-exploited right to propose a draft act by any Member of Parliament or group of them. They stress the fact that government, regional representatives as well as the Senate are obliged to hold a pre-discussion of the draft and adopt it in the form of a resolution, members of parliament propose drafts independently, without explanatory report and without the possibility of previous public review. Concluding their analysis of Czech legal environment authors note that the legislative process „can nowadays be perceived as a relatively stable mechanism which enables particular social groups direct entry and gives them the opportunity to influence the contents of legal drafts“. (p. 37). However, they still recommend considering amendments of the Rules of Procedure of the Chamber of Deputies, which would eliminate mentioned shortcomings. Unfortunately, they do not address the proposed changes in more detail. Furthermore, many readers would probably welcome if authors directed their attention at current problems regarding legal regulation of the right to strike and the (non)existence of collective contracts at higher level, which are problems currently present in Slovakia, too. These problem areas are closely linked not only with the development of legal order (democratic legal regulation of participation and interest mediation), but mainly with practical activities of surveyed collective actors in the sphere of their operation, which lies at the core of this publication.

Representation and mediation of citizens' interests by means of public administration are topics discussed by the authors of second chapter, *Lukáš Linek* and *Daniel Trnka*. They state that citizens' participation may and needs to be realised mainly through so-called consultations with the public, throughout the whole decision-making process, by means of integrating the public at all stages of this process. New information and communication technologies facilitate communication with the public, citizens are better informed. However, as far as Czech public contribution to decision-making is concerned, „until now this is happening rather sporadically and lacks some kind of a system“. (p. 57). Civic participation in the decision-making remains low in the practice, which brings about potential risks of „legitimising the decisions of local administration

authorities merely through formal citizens' participation or decision processes being controlled by well organised groups representing particular interests". (p. 57) These findings would deserve further detailed research, including an analysis of causes of this situation – to what extent is it a reflection for instance of civil (non)competence and (dis)interest and the extent to which it is possibly caused by deeper-reaching, system factors.

Author *Petra Rakušanová* looks at the development of third (non-for-profit) sector in the Czech Republic in the context of Central Europe and compares it to Western Europe, too. In her view, characteristic features of Central European non-for-profit sector are „rather high centralisation and bureaucratisation, as well as defining itself against the state which is often personalised through political parties“. (p. 99) She considers „inter-connections between political sphere and non-for-profit sector“ to be another common denominator of the third sector in Central European post-Socialist context, typical mainly for Austria and Czech republic. Author claims that in Poland and Slovakia, „on the contrary, the non-for-profit sector is approaching the private sphere“. (p. 99) In agreement with Marc M. Howard, the author does not regard low civil participation as indicating instability of democracy – rather, as a sign of problematic relationship between citizens and state.

Next three chapters are dedicated to the social dialogue (Zdenka Mansfeldová) and its participants: trade unions (Renáta Vašková, Aleš Kroupa, and Jaroslav Hála) and employer associations (Stanislav Kunc, Petr Hartoš). At the centre of attention is social dialogue on national (macro-) level and its institutionalised form – the so-called tripartite. Evolution of Czech tripartite, observed in the context of social dialogue development in Europe, is characterised by a move from *policy concertation* in the 1990s to current *policy consultation*. Conceptual framework for this reflection was provided by Philippe Schmitter at the beginning of the 1980s when he used the term *policy concertation* to describe the policy, or rather institutionalised system of policy formation where interest groups cooperate with public authorities when articulating interests but also allocating values and implementing the policy. We can briefly define this type of policy as „harmonising the interests of government representatives, employees and employers when creating government policy in areas including fiscal policy, monetary policy, industrial and trade policy, labour market and employment policy as well as regional policy“. (p. 106) However, cooperation or dialogue between social partners not always reaches this level and it can often be realised only through the so-called *policy consultation*.

Authors state that, unlike in many old EU member states, in Czech Republic the focus of social dialogue is on national and enterprise level, whereas sector and regional forms and structures are underdeveloped or completely lacking. This

statement can to various extents be applied to all new EU members, including Slovakia. Similarly, the proportion of employees who are covered by collective contracts is substantially lower in new member states. Authors appreciate the Europeisation of Czech social dialogue. They point out that appropriate structures for the Europeisation exist, and prove this by noting the existence of relevant international structures, employers' and trade unions offices and confederations, along with membership and activities of Czech employers' and trade union associations within these structures.

Regional administrations as interest groups are at the centre of analysis by *Stanislav Kunc* and *Lukáš Linek* in the eighth chapter. Authors analyse and compare organisational structure, membership basis and strategy used to articulate interests in two associations of regional administration – Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic and Association of Regions of the Czech Republic. „Union of Towns and Municipalities is trying to provide a platform for finding common interests of mayors and municipal representatives; however in light of inactivity of its members it becomes something of a professional agency that defines, constructs and promotes their interests. Association of Regions, on the other hand, is a more instrumental organisation which is used in cases when otherwise strong regional mayors need to stress the united and apolitical character of their demands.“ (p. 231) Authors add, that low participation by the mayors is caused and enforced by general civil passivity and unwillingness to participate in public affairs that go beyond the boundaries of one's own municipality.

In the final chapter, *Jiří Vinopal* offers an overview of empirical surveys realised within the framework of the project. He specifies where and how the individual quantitative and qualitative research methods were used – extensive questionnaire surveys, in-depth and expert interviews, document analyses, secondary data analyses and focus groups.

An advantage of the reviewed publication is the fact that it describes, in a complex and transparent way, the current situation as well as main tendencies in the development of surveyed interest organisations in the Czech Republic, their activities and functions within a democratic political system. It provides a series of unique empirical findings and factual data, which it attempts to generalise and reflect on within relevant theoretical and socio-political frameworks.

The book contains a subject index, short information on its authors and list of abbreviations. It is a worthy culmination of surveys mentioned in the introduction and presentation of their results. In this sense, it can serve us as a stimulating inspiration.

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