7 The State and Civil Society: Priorities During the First Stage of Transition

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Although the following concentrates on the relationship between the state and society in the evolution of post-socialism, the focus will be on the example of the Baltics, mainly Latvia. However, many of the issues and problems touched upon in this context have a more general significance.

The number of publications dedicated not only to the re-emergence of the independent states but also to the subject of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe has drastically increased during the past years, mainly in connection with the democratization processes in the region (Keane, 1988; Held, 1993, 61–2; P.G. Lewis, 1993).

Two assertions almost always made are of vital importance. First, civil society is an irreplaceable virtue or an obligatory condition of stable liberal democracy (Shils, 1991; J. Hall, 1993). Second, the character and nature of civil society indicate the degree and level of democratization of post-communist society and its chances of survival, as well as helping to forecast the fate of transition in the respective society (P.G. Lewis, 1992; J. Hall, 1993).

At the same time other analyses of the transition process demonstrate that when liberalization precedes democratization (and this is the case in post-Soviet societies), democratic pressures from below constrain the process of economic liberalization which in turn slows down democratization or even provokes the return to authoritarian rule. Thus the process resembles the transition in Latin America during the inter-war period (Misztal, 1991; Przeworski, 1991) or the developments in the Baltics in the 1920s. In this connection one important question appears on the agenda: is it worthwhile to stimulate the development of a politically conscious society in the transitional process? Isn’t it more effective to follow a model where the state to a great extent creates the bourgeoisie, supports industrialization, denies liberalism and
puts nation and order in its place as in Germany between the wars (J. Hall, 1993)?

In Latvia, this specific choice of development model is supported by one important segment of the political elite – the radical national wing (Diena, 15 April 1993) – while gradually receiving increasing approval from different social groups. In April 1995, the Latvian Farmers’ Union (LFU) – one of the most influential parties in Latvia – began a campaign for a national referendum with the aim of amending the constitution and of introducing general presidential elections. At the moment the president is elected by the Parliament (the Saeima) and acts mainly as a representative figure. The aim of the present initiative is to give the President of the Republic (who was elected deputy as a member of LFU) additional power in spite of the party’s claims that Latvia remains a parliamentary republic.

Polls carried out by the Latvian Social Research Centre show that this reform is fully supported by 54.4 per cent of the population. Only 10 per cent supports a parliamentary republic and is against the reform. The majority of the population perceives it as a step toward the establishment of a much desired ‘strong hand’ power. This opinion is used by the LFU to argue for the necessity to amend the Constitution. At the same time the president’s formal authorities are formulated rather vaguely in the LFU’s reform draft. This fact has created the suspicion that the authors are rather unaware of its potential political consequences. One of the most important is the escalation of competition between the President and the government. It can lead to the substitution of parliamentary democracy by presidential democracy, or it could result in the establishment of authoritarian rule, especially when taking into account Latvia’s pre-war experience. In 1934, Parliament was abolished and authoritarian presidential rule by Ulmanis was established. Today, one-quarter of the population regards this period as ‘the golden age’ of Latvian history. In contrast, only 6.6 per cent looks upon the period of parliamentary democracy (1918–34) in a similar vein. This situation has created a dilemma. What factors contribute to democracy: mobilization of civil society (in the case of Latvia, on the basis of the defence of national values) or state-controlled liberalization of the economy?

In the beginning of the first stage of transition three main goals were projected: a democratic society, a free market economy, and re-establishment of the nation-state. The achievement of these goals met greater difficulties in Latvia than in Central Europe. Independent state institutions had not functioned since 1940, and neither had many