

International law aspects of the nongovernmental organizations with special survey on the Republic of North Macedonia

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Ana VITKOVA

*Faculty of Law Iustinianus Primus of Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, RNM
Corresponding Author e-mail: ana.vitkova@hotmail.com

Abstract

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and their legal status have not been a subject of much investigation. They are playing an increasing political role on the international scene, and their position in relation to international law is generally regarded as important but informal. Their actual legal status has focus on human rights law. From an aspect of international decision-making, non-governmental organisation is an important form of public participation that can strengthen the flawed legitimacy of the state system of international law.

When it comes to Republic of Macedonia, NGOs are still a relatively new component of Macedonia's political landscape. In the last 50 years, independent, citizen-based initiatives were discouraged in the Republic of North Macedonia, except in government-sanctioned and government-controlled areas. Even though most NorthMacedonian NGOs are relatively young, in the recent years, the role of the NGOs is much more strengthened, that brings the dilemma if their interferences made an impact in national internal affairs.

Keywords: non-governmental organization, international law.

1. Introduction

Common theories of the legal status of NGOs were that the states are the ones that are in dominant position to decide the legal status of the non-state entities, having in mind that the states are the actors of the international law. But the role of these entities is encreasing and they are a fact that the international law needs to deal with.

The general rules that can be drawn from the laws themselves are the ones that actually exist in practice. The classical concepts relating to the actors of international law – such as international legal personality and subjects of international law, have an unclear meaning of these concepts, but they are sometimes understood to reflect the primary nature of international law and its actors. The examination of the status of NGOs means to deal with international legal material from all parts of international law that expressly relate to NGOs or can be used by these organisations for activities within the international legal system. In other words, the international legal status of NGOs is the sum of all the rules and practices laid down by states and international organizations for their interaction on the international level with NGOs, and any more general norms which can possibly be induced from this material.

The civil sector in the society has special importance for the democratic values in the country and for encouragement of the social awareness of the citizens. In order to meet the chalenges that every country has to deal with, the contribution of the civil sector is necessary in building democratic culture on every level and every area of the social life. Republic of Macedonia in the last decade of its existence is actively taking measures to build continuous, transparent and inclusive dialogue with the civil sector by treating it like equal partner and corector of the state policies.

2. The legal status of NGOs in international law

Common for the NGOs as organisations is that they possess international legal rights in their capacity as organisations related to their existence and functioning. Differences in geographical regions bring different categories of NGOs which then formulate different rights and obligations for them as organisations. Whether the rights of NGOs in different geographical regions may vary, the dilemma that these rights include corporate elements is not strong and compared to the general status of NGOs on the universal level, international law gives a strong position to organisations regarding workers and employers.

The European Convention on the Recognition of the Legal Personality of International Non-Governmental Organisations¹ gives the right to the NGOs based within the territory of state to be recognised as legal persons within the territories of other state parties to the Convention. In addition, the Fundamental principles on the status of Non-Governmental Organisations in Europe² formulate at least guidelines on the protection that should be afforded NGOs under national legislation, and express a general recognition of the importance and legitimate expectations of NGOs within the society.

Regarding obligations, the position of NGOs is still not clear, probably because of general concerns about the formulation of international legal duties for non-state actors outside clearly defined fields. Nevertheless, some 'grey zones' of normativity seem to exist within human rights law, where non-state actors have the responsibility, inter alia, not to 'engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights' of others, as stated in Article 30 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights³. Moreover, state parties to the International Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination⁴ are obliged to prohibit racist organisations and their activities. This Convention lays down limits to the rights of organisations. NGOs which enter into formal relations with international governments also undertake certain obligations formulated by the resolutions which form the basis for such cooperation. Finally, many NGOs voluntarily stick to codes of conduct which are sometimes a requirement by international governments in their agreements with NGOs.

The area that is most familiar to dealing with NGOs is the international humanitarian law. Regarding the status of NGOs within this field of law, there are numerous provisions in the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols⁵ which oblige state parties to respect and protect the work of humanitarian organisations, once their assistance has been accepted. The most interesting rule within this field of law from the perspective of the international legal status of NGOs is the provision of the Geneva Conventions that states that the contracting parties may agree to entrust to an organisation which offers all guarantees of impartiality and effectiveness as a protecting power.

The standing of NGOs before international and regional tribunals and judicial bodies is also important for their legal treatment. In the whole complex of such procedures, it is striking to find that NGOs have acquired standing within so many fields and regions of law. It is also noticeable that the number of procedures accessible to NGOs is increasing. On the international level,

¹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/124>

² <https://www.osce.org/odihr/37858>

³ <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cerd.aspx>

⁵ <https://www.icrc.org/eng/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions/overview-geneva-conventions.htm>

NGOs still have access only to quasi-judicial procedures, but are often active in individual cases examined by the UN treaty bodies, but lack standing of their own. The most important international court – the International Court of Justice – is closed to non-state actors, although NGOs have attempted to make use of this Court. The European Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Justice are currently the only courts which are directly accessible to NGOs as parties, and they also provide limited access. The International Court of Justice has the possibility under its Statute to notify ‘international organisations’ able to supply relevant information that the Court will be prepared to receive written or to hear oral statements, but seems to have issued such a notification to an NGO only once.

2.1 Participation instead of consultation

Many international conferences have a common characteristic to give NGOs the right to participate. Conferences demonstrate an increasing acceptance of NGOs as partners in dialogue, at both law-making and other meetings, on the part of states. In fact, the number of NGO representatives often exceeds the number of state representatives.

The states are the ones that take the decisions, and a decision-maker may be influenced by many different persons, trends and politics. However, the influence that NGOs seem to have in some international relations demonstrates that the rules that allow for their presence and for their submissions are a evidence of an acceptance of the participation of NGOs in international legal system. Another interesting feature of intergovernmental negotiations is that states are sometimes represented by NGOs, for example, at environmental meetings. On the other hand, there are also conferences and bodies which have limited contacts with NGOs, such as the International Monetary Fund. This diverse picture of the international legal status of NGOs leads to the question whether there are any elements of this status which are common to all categories of NGOs throughout the world. Regarding rights, this is uncertain. The legal status which is potentially open for all international organisations is the consultative status with NGOs. NGOs may also participate in international conferences held by the United Nations if they can demonstrate that their activities are of relevance to the conference. Finally, many NGOs are potential partners in operational co-operation with intergovernmental bodies, and are therefore also potential parties to agreements concluded under international law. In sum, most elements of the international legal status of NGOs vary depending on which category of NGOs the organisation belongs to and in which region it is based.

2.2 Possible developments of the legal status of NGOs

Apart from gradual developments of the international legal status of NGOs through diverse rules in treaty-law, resolutions adopted within international governmental organizations and customary law, states might in the future see advantages in clarifying and generalising the legal position of NGOs through international instruments. The European Convention on the Recognition of the Legal Personality of International Non-Governmental Organisations provides that the legal personality and capacity of international NGOs within the territory of the state party where they have their statutory offices shall also be recognised within other contracting states.

However, while the European Convention on the Recognition of the Legal Personality of International Non-Governmental Organisations provides a legal platform for NGOs which seek to extend their activities into new states, the main interest of many NGOs is to participate on the

international scene. One way of attributing NGOs with a more general legal status on the international scene would be to create a common system among international government organizations for NGO participation. A shared system would mean that available resources could be used more rationally. Moreover, the systems for reviewing applications from NGOs that seek to participate could be made more based on expertise, and than become less politicised. The bodies for granting consultative status and accreditation are usually composed of state representatives, and whether organisations are granted or denied access sometimes depends more on where they are based and which states are represented in the organ deciding on their application, than on to what extent they meet the formal requirements. A more general status that would provide access to a combination of international institutions after review of the organisation could also have the function of creating public confidence for the NGOs accepted, which could perhaps even lead to a more generally accepted understanding of the concept of 'NGO'. Furthermore, it could also create clearer accountability on the part of NGOs by requiring compliance with international legal rules or codes of conduct, in particular within the framework of operational collaboration. Finally, better methods for securing fair geographical and social representation could be established in relation to such arrangements for cooperation.⁶

The process of globalisation, with its diffusion of state power, can cause democratic deficits which weaken the legitimacy of international law in relation to people all over the world. It is observed that the weak influence of traditional democracy in matters of global governance is one reason why citizens in different parts of the world are urging greater democratic accountability from international organisations. The legitimacy of international decision-making is also problematic in relation to nationally unrepresented or underrepresented groups, such as cultural, religious and linguistic minorities. It is considered that the regulated participation of NGOs as informants and partners of dialogue in intergovernmental meetings was a phenomenon that was healthy for the overall functioning of international law and that it contributes to strengthening its legitimacy. It was not suggested that NGOs should have a general right to vote or negotiate alongside governments in international bodies. From a more pragmatic point of view, co-operation with NGOs can also help bring information and expertise into intergovernmental scene and back again to the public.

With all the characteristics and goals of the NGOs they give the impression that it NGOs are 'good'. This is not the case. It is recognised that NGOs are self-appointed, single-issue-oriented and often not accountable to the people on whose behalf they claim to speak. The NGO sector is also dominated by the North in several reasons, such as power and resources. The definition of 'non- governmental organisation' is outlined on the basis of definitions which are contained in international instruments. This definition was fairly basic in its character and did in principle not distinguish between organisations on the basis of their objectives. It is suggested that the question of whether international law should provide and protect a form of political participation through non-governmental organisation is on another level than the issue of which particular organisations should be entitled to participate in which particular situations, and what should then be required in terms of structure, objective, accountability, etc. in these different contexts.

It should also be observed that the points made as regards the international participation of NGOs are not intended to be exclusive of other actors. The fact that it is suggested that the role of NGOs is important in some contexts does not mean that other actors are considered less important. At the same time, it is argued that non-governmental organisation as a form or an

⁶ Anna Karin Lindblom, *Non-Governmental Organisations in International Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2005

instrument of participation is important, because it is neutral to different interests, sectors of society and objectives. It provides a common platform for a diversity which is also its strength. The international legal status of NGOs, as composed of these different factors, is considerable and this status is increasing. New complaints procedures which provide standing for NGOs were put in place during the 1990s and the practice of some courts has become more permissive towards NGOs. New arrangements for consultation with NGOs have been established by international governments, and some of the older mechanisms for consultation with NGOs have been replaced by arrangements for participation. The participation of NGOs in international conferences has also been increased, and the influence of these organisations on international law-making more generally recognised.

In view of what has been said above about the role of NGOs in relation to the legitimacy of international law and the position that has actually been provided for NGOs in international law, the question can be raised if the international legal system will reach a point when NGOs have a general right to participate in international legal discourse.

3. NGOs in Republic of North Macedonia

The acting of the civil associations and foundations in the Republic of Macedonia is regulated with article 20 from the Constitution which guarantees the freedom of associating of the citizens to achieve and protect their economic, social, cultural and other rights and beliefs, where the citizens can freely form civil associations, to join them and leave them. The legal frame of the civil sector was established in 1998 with the Law of civil associations and foundations and then in 2010 with the new Law of associations and foundations, which harmonized the legal frame with the european standards which will bring to sustainability of this sector in the future.

The Government of the Republic of Macedonia within its politics encourages the development of the civil society through continuous and effective collaboration with the civil sector and in December 2004 in the General secretariat, new unit was established, Unit for collaboration with non-governmental organisations. Later, in 2007 they adopted a Strategy for collaboration of the Government with the civil sector with Action plan 2007-2011, which set the basis for collaboration between the Government and the civil sector and what was highlighted was the importance of the participation of the citizens in creating policies, their suggestions and critics. Also, in 2007 they brought a Code of good practices for financial support of the associations and foundations from the Budget of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia. This important role of the civil sector in the development of the society contributes for strengthening of the democracy, pluralism and tolerance, which lead to the second Strategy for collaboration of the Government with the civil sector in 2012 with Action plan 2012-2017. In may 2016, the Government brought a decision about formation of Council for collaboration between the Government and the civil sector, which in November 2017 was changed in order to get bigger functionality and collaboration. The purpose of these strategic documents is through measures for collaboration of the Government with the civil sector to get to promotion of the collaboration and partner relations, as well as mutual trust, responsibility and equal opportunities in the overall social trends. Based on the results so far and the needs for development in the future, the newest Strategy for collaboration of the Government with the civil sector 2018-2020 was adopted, which worked out future activities for promotion of the collaboration and development of the civil sector as a correction of the power in the country, service of the citizens and partner of the state and its engine.

The civil sector in the Republic of North Macedonia consists of associations, foundations, unions, foreign organisations and other forms of associating which are non-profit, not connected to political parties and are established for achievement and protection of rights and beliefs in accordance with the Constitution and the laws. According to the Central registry data, in April 2018, there were 8924 registered civil organisations, from which 8780 associations and unions and 144 foundations. But, the total number of the active civil organisations, meaning the ones that submitted annual report for 2017 is 5975, from which 5853 associations and unions and 122 foundations. In relation to 2015 when the number of active organisations was 4148, in 2017 there is an increase of their number for 30,58%.

The total income of the civil organisations in 2017 was 7.779.311.200,00 denars (around 126,5 million euros) from which 6.831.008.273,00 (around 111 million euros) are income for associations and unions, and 948.302.927,00 (around 15 million euros) for foundations. This amount has also increased in relation to 2015 for 31,72% when the total amount was 5.312.039.865,00 denars (around 86,3 million euros). What is noticeable is the enormous difference in the number of the civil organisations in the Republic of Macedonia and their income, especially in the last three years. To find out the reason for this huge increase of the number and the funds of these organisations, we should go back to the happenings in 2015 in the Republic of Macedonia.

3.1 The North Macedonian case - conspiracy against the government?

In February 2015, the opposition leader accused the Prime Minister of the country for wiretapping more than 20.000 people including social activists, judges, political opponents, foreign ambassadors and more than 100 journalists. Of course the charges were rejected by the Government, but the opposition party started releasing recordings of phone conversations which later led for the opposition activists and protesters to set up tents and camped near the government building, planning to stay until the government resigned. Demonstrations continued to grow and after series of difficult meetings when the crisis prompted, the wiretapping crisis was solved through the so called Przhino agreement of 2015, which was brought by EU mediation. The agreement set out a roadmap leading toward early elections at the end of 2016 even though the original schedule was postponed a few times according to analyses coordinated by leading think tanks and watchdogs.

After the elections, the North Macedonia's ruling party VMRO-DPMNE won the majority in tightly contested early parliamentary elections. The president of the party and former Prime Minister announced a manifesto, that declares that the ruling party plans to put an end to foreign meddling, stop negotiations under EU or US mediation and fight against NGOs financed from abroad. In a scathing speech against the western diplomats in the country he accused unnamed foreign representatives of "trying to influence the SEC" through their actions. "Some ambassadors are meddling far too much in our internal politics. That must stop," he declared. "We have information that foreign representatives were involved in the work of the SEC with a goal to influence one of its members to conduct post-election engineering and falsifying the will of the citizens", Gruevski said. He started blaming civil society actors. He denounced the foreign interferences in national internal affairs, notably by directly threatening NGOs that receive funds from abroad, claiming they were corrupted and served foreign interests detrimental to North Macedonia's interests. This led to the movement "Stop Operation Soros", created in January 2017 by pro-governmental experts can illustrate that attempt to undermine civil sector's

capacities to carry out their missions by banning the George Soros' Open Society Foundation grants.

Since the beginning of the political crisis in North Macedonia, pro-government media regularly blamed the EU, the US and NGOs allegedly financed by American billionaire George Soros for what they perceive as conspiracy against the government. "We'll fight for de-Soros-isation of North Macedonia and strengthening of an independent civil society that won't be under anyone's control," Gruevski announced. The Stop Operation Soros movement, SOS, was presented and the founders called on all "free minded citizens" to join SOS in the "fight against one-mindedness in the civil sector, which is devised and led by George Soros". They say their first activities will focus on exposing the subversive activities of Macedonian NGOs financed by the billionaire in North Macedonia. Russia more or less outlawed Soros-affiliated organisations in 2015. This January, authorities in Hungary said they would use "all the tools at its disposal" to "sweep out" NGOs funded by the Hungarian-born financier, which "serve global capitalists and back political correctness over national governments." Hungarian Leader Viktor Orban last year accused Soros of destabilizing Europe by encouraging mass immigration to Europe from Middle Eastern war zones.

That operation in North Macedonia began with the Public Revenue Office, UJP confirmed that it is preparing to send financial inspectors to the Foundation Open Society - North Macedonia and to 20 other NGOs, but dismissed allegations that its actions were motivated by the ruling party threat to combat internationally-funded civil sector groups that allegedly work for foreign interests. "The UJP carries out regular controls of all taxpayers based on its legal jurisdiction, regardless of political events in the country," the UJP said in a press statement. It added that the increased number of inspections was undertaken in response to a request by another state institution, filed in November, suggesting that its actions predate the country's early elections in December.

"The control and the transparency in the financing of civil organizations have to be strengthened and all doubts have to be rejected and a distinction has to be made between non-government organizations that truly work for the benefit of the people and those that hide behind the NGO curtain.", stated the president of the state, Gjorge Ivanov, in an interview for the Hungarian daily newspaper Magyar Hírlap when he was answering about the efforts that North Macedonia and Hungary invest in the decrease of political activism by civil organizations supported by George Soros.

-A misuse of the civil sector mustn't be allowed. As a law professor, I spent a lot of years in the civil sector, foundations, institutions, non-government organizations with an initiative to help the society to become more mature. Unfortunately, with a few exceptions, this sector is now dominated by political interests and the citizen's interests are at the bottom of the priorities of these organizations – said Ivanov. The North Macedonian president said that "apart from a political, the NGO's have an ethnic color since some of the foreign foundations insist on supporting them on an ethnic basis."

-I condemn all efforts for politicizing the civil sector and the effort to make them biased. It is unacceptable that foreign assets flow into the non-government sector for the development of political goals, initiation of activities that involve direct foreign involvement into the internal affairs of a sovereign country – said Ivanov. According to him, the civil sector has to contribute to the progress and positive changes that will be of benefit to the country.

-Instead of that, we have to deal with organizations that in various ways and without any self-criticism act destructively and in contrary to the national and civil interests – concludes Ivanov.

3.2 "De-Sorosization" or treating the NGO sector as an equal partner?

At the start of the "de-Sorosization" campaign in December 2016, Gruevski called for a "showdown" with NGOs cooperating with Soros' foundation and foreign government aid organizations.

He argued that rather than seeking support from outside of North Macedonia, the country's civil sector should instead rely on the North Macedonian government for financial support. This proposal would have made NGOs in a way dependent on the government, an idea that weakens the very essence of many for a civil society organization, which is to maintain independence from the government in order to best hold it to account for its commitments to the public.

To support that proposal, some organizations promoted the notion that civil society should be about charity or humanitarian aid, and that it should not be involved with civic engagement, anti-corruption, media or any activity related to political decision-making. Some civil society activists also commented via social media that they would decline financial support from the government in their jurisdiction, in order to maintain accountability to the public. Certain NGOs benefitted from this structure, as some state funds were used to support sports clubs, as well as service-based organizations like associations of people with disabilities or retired persons.

The campaign was meant to supervise the work of local organizations associated with the philanthropic foundation of billionaire George Soros, along with other western institutions such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The executive director of the Foundation Open Society - Macedonia, suggested that the Gruevski government and ruling party targeted NGOs because civil society, according to them, had been "the chief driver of changes and progress" in Macedonia from 2014 to the present. The authorities recognized 21 NGOs that had participated in a pre-election civil campaign "We decide", which was meant to improve public understanding of the electoral system and rules. State inquiries targeted one donor specifically, which was not directly connected to the "We decide" action: the US Agency for International Development or USAID, which over the last years has supported large capacity building initiatives for civil society. Paralel with these happenings, in March 2017 the government issued their regular public call offering grants for civil society organizations, like it did every year starting from 2007. These grants were distributed through an unusually speedy procedure, mainly to new organizations, but the new government annulled the call without any explanation.

At a May 2017 public conference on anti-corruption, a representative of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption was asked about the investigations against NGOs. He acknowledged that the Commission initiated the "de-Sorosisation" controls involving coordinated action of institutions including the National Bank and the Public Revenue Service (both of which imposed financial audits on NGOs) and the Public Prosecutor's Office (PPO) for Organized Crime and Corruption. The PPO also engaged the Organized Crime Unit of the Ministry of Interior, and the Financial Police, a subsidiary of the Ministry of Finance. In a recorded statement at the conference, president of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption, said the following:

“An ambassador of large institution came to us and asked why we initiated control of the work of the civic organizations. He said 'Only their donor can conduct controls' in their country. And I replied - but what if the donor is a terrorist organization?”

A work plan adopted by the new government in the middle of 2017 clearly states that the government will treat civil society as an equal partner and that state institutions will conduct new "investigations of the cases of intimidation and pressure on civil society organizations." After the forming of the new government, the chief state prosecutor, was sacked by the parliament, giving NGOs hope that things will change for them. After that, the high level expert group led by the former European Commissioner Reinhard Priebe in charge of monitoring democratic reforms in Macedonia reiterated the need to clear up the situation which had implications beyond affecting the work of the 21 targeted organizations.

Later, the Minister of Interior gave a public statement suggesting that investigations had concluded, and that no evidence of illegal behavior on the part of the NGOs had been found. However, as far as official data can be found, the origin of the NGOs money are not under anyone's supervision that would provide legal background for their work.

4. Conclusion

From a legal perspective on international affairs, NGOs seem to remain unknown territory. A historical analysis of NGO perception in international law demonstrates that the question of international personality of NGOs has not yet sufficiently been answered. Paradoxically, while states have increasingly incorporated NGOs into structures and procedures of global governance, it remains unclear what characterizes NGOs and what status they officially have under international law. Although states welcome NGO contributions to international negotiation processes and have granted "private associations" some recognition at the national level, they have not yet agreed on a standard for NGOs operating in the transnational sphere.

The analysis of rules and regulations over the last century has revealed that international law on the status of NGOs remains significantly underdeveloped. More effort has been put into regulating the relationship between NGOs and other actors, such as the United Nations, than into setting standards for NGOs. Moreover, international agreements on the legal personality of NGOs seem to advance slowly. Thus, during the last century, not much progress has been made; the European Convention of 1986 does not differ much from laws on NGOs from many decades earlier. NGOs are only indirectly recognized through other sources of international law that predict a role for them.

In sum, whereas NGOs increasingly take part in advancing international legal standards on a variety of issues, the status of NGOs in international law has not yet progressed. Considering the growing number of NGOs participating in international life and the evolving role they play in negotiation processes, it is astonishing that it is still unclear how to characterize an NGO in legal terms. NGOs are often invited to take part in international affairs because they are seen as "representing civil society" and, as such, their participation is interpreted as legitimizing or democratizing the whole process. Taking into account, however, that some states take advantage of this situation and select, appoint, or support specific government-friendly NGOs, the necessity for international standards becomes important. In addition, it is in the interest of NGOs to maintain their "pure" image, because otherwise the representativity of NGOs and thus their reason for being could be called into question.

What remains unclear about the last years in North Macedonia is that we don't exactly know what really happened in the political scene in the country. Many questions still remain open. For example, what was the reason that the NGO sector starting from 2015 had increased their income

for more than 30% from abroad? What was the reason for that amount of money to come into a small country as Republic of Macedonia struggling to strengthen as a country? Are the NGOs an area that can not be controlled whether their money is spent according to the laws or not? What were that money used for when we can't see much progress in the country especially from the NGO sector? Do they have that much power to make a change of powers in the country through different measures and activities? Are they representing the interests of strongmen in world politics? Was there any hidden agenda in the changing of the power in the country? How come the party that had the majority for more than 11 years in the country, was not able to form a government with the party of the Albanian minority (DUI) that has been their coalition partner for the same 11 years? What was the reason that the coalition didn't make it this time but succeeded for DUI with the opposition social-democratic party (SDSM) as a partner? These and similar questions still seek for answers. Having in mind that the power changed in Macedonia, all the controls and inspections of the money from abroad for NGOs were stopped from the new officials in the state institutions. So, many things remain unfamiliar for the citizens of the country, for now.

The change of political atmosphere in Macedonia doesn't imply that all problems of uncontrolled civil society and independent media will be solved easily. Under the new government, if the civil sector is treated fairly and their money are used for legal purposes, they will provide appropriate role in the next period of political reforms in the country, although facing dismal economic reality and other hostile influences coming from political conflicts both within and outside of the country.

While there is still a glimmer of hope that Macedonia may one day become part of the EU, NGOs stress that one of the important challenges is to educate citizens so that they may fully exercise their role as decision-makers in a modern democratic society and hold their governments to account - regardless of who is in power. Macedonian activists are attempting to draw lessons from their predicament, that might be helpful to other societies facing similar challenges.

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