

Interview with Lyudmila Georgieva

Public Advocates

Elections Today: How would you assess the health of civil society in Bulgaria today? In the words of David Cohen of the Advocacy Institute, does civil society in Bulgaria have the "public space" it needs to function?

Lyudmila Georgieva: Yes, the necessary constitutional and legislative framework exists to guarantee the development of a vibrant civil society: separation of powers, democratic political institutions, freedom of speech and association, and a free media. I believe the fact that more than 8,000 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and 286 political parties have been registered in my country confirms a healthy civil society.



ET: In your work with Foundation Common Cause, an organization that educates citizens in the art of political advocacy, what have you found allows NGOs to act as effective political advocates?

LG: First, and most importantly, political institutions have recently become more open (such as the parliament and municipal councils) and joint advisory commissions to the government have been established especially to allow NGO participation. All these committees now include representatives of both the government and NGOs, and they function as consultative bodies that help in the planning and implementation of national policy in various fields. Second, many NGOs have developed the capacity and expertise that make them credible sources of specialized information for our executive, legislative and self-governing institutions.

“Our NGOs have not yet realized that their strength is in membership....”

We have access, we have the right to represent and defend our specific interests and now we have to learn how to present them in a more efficient way. A recent poll shows that 69% of citizens do not recognize NGOs as mediators that represent their interests and, in fact, only 3% of respondents report involvement in any NGO activities. That is why it is really crucial to make our NGOs more representative so they are better able to carry out their responsibilities and to become real intermediaries between governmental institutions and NGO members.

ET: In a recent study your foundation conducted entitled "Citizen Participation in the Legislative Process," you found that many NGOs did not take advantage of all the participation opportunities available to them. Why do you believe this was the case?

LG: One of the main reasons is their lack of understanding of the gist of advocacy and the role and mission of interest groups. Our NGOs have not yet realized that their strength is in membership and therefore NGO leaders do not usually try to inform, involve and mobilize their members in support of the group's legislative proposals. This definitely would improve the results of their advocacy efforts.

Do you try to involve your members in your attempts to influence parliamentary committees' decisions?



From Citizen Participation in the Legislative Process, Sofia: Foundation Common Cause, 2001.

Another reason is their lack of knowledge about basic advocacy tools and strategies. Advocacy is not well known in our country. According to a survey, 65% of respondents do not know what lobbying is. Many people view lobbying as negative and only 4% equate it with positive action, like the defense of a common cause or efforts to represent our national interests abroad. So, our NGOs have to educate their members about the full arsenal of advocacy tools and strategies and encourage them to actively support advocacy campaigns.

ET: How difficult do you think CSOs find it to maintain a line between citizen advocacy and advocacy for special interests?

LG: That is the problem in Bulgaria: we do not try to achieve a balance between special and public interests. Business associations and labor unions are usually much more active in bringing their proposals to the attention of policymakers. I strongly believe that every group has the equal right to present and publicly defend its interests, but unfortunately, there is often no one on the "other side" who tries to present alternatives or mobilize public support to try to at least limit the influence of special interests.

Ms. Georgieva is a founding chair of Foundation Common Cause in Sofia and a 2003-04 Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow with the National Endowment for Democracy.