Public perceptions of non-governmental organisations in Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Macedonia

Åse Berit Grødeland*

Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, Sinsenveien 47 B, P.O. Box 44 Blindern, N-0313 Oslo, Norway
Available online 5 May 2006

Abstract

The article examines the relationship between NGOs and the general public in Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Macedonia. This relationship is often perceived as troubled. Focus group findings, however, suggest that ordinary people’s attitudes towards local NGOs are rather more nuanced and that quite a few people would like to join an NGO themselves, if given an opportunity. NGOs should therefore make more effort to tap into this potential, by providing more and better information about their activities available to the general public and by being more inclusive, thus enhancing both NGO legitimacy and future sustainability in the region. © 2006 The Regents of the University of California. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Non-governmental organisations; Public perceptions; Focus groups; Serbia; Bosnia & Herzegovina; Macedonia

“It really strikes me as suspicious when people buy a jeep or a luxurious car and drive around in it after two or three successful projects”

(Stip, Macedonia, focus group participant no. 5)

* Tel.: +47 22 95 83 71.
E-mail address: ase.grodeland@nibr.no

0967-067X/$ - see front matter © 2006 The Regents of the University of California. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.postcomstud.2006.03.002
Introduction

The international organisations operating in Bosnia & Herzegovina have seen the strengthening of civil society as an essential prerequisite for democratisation and peace building in the aftermath of war (Chandler, 1999). “Civil society” both in Bosnia and also in other parts of the former Yugoslavia “became conflated with non-governmental organisations, the number of which, in any given society, has been used as a crude index of the health of a (civil) society.” (Stubbs, 1999). During recent years the international community has therefore channelled considerable resources into the NGO sector not only in Bosnia (Chandler, 1999), but also in neighbouring countries Serbia and Macedonia.

Belloni (2000, p. 13) argues that the international community’s approach to strengthening civil society in Bosnia has been rather technical, “expressed through the focus and sometimes the obsession with, the quantifiable, numerical growth of NGOs.” This approach has not been particularly successful. Firstly, international support for local Bosnian NGOs seems to have been more focused on humanitarian aid and service provision than on peace building and strengthening democracy as such. Secondly, it appears that the more support Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other international organisations have provided to Bosnian NGOs, the less effective they have become, as they have “never been forced to build their own base of popular support or take on the arguments or political programmes of the nationalists.” (Chandler, 1999, p. 138, p. 151).

In a comparative study of voluntary organisations in post-communist states Howard (2003) concludes that public participation in such organisations is low. Similar trends can be observed in the successor states to the former Republic of Yugoslavia. Even larger NGOs that in recent years have succeeded in raising public awareness on issues such as corruption and also in putting a fair amount of pressure on government, have largely failed to mobilise the general public in support of their cause (Tisne and Smilov, 2004).

A number of reasons have been given for this—for instance the inherent weaknesses within the NGOs themselves; general public disillusionment—even apathy—with political and economic reform; financial hardship that makes it difficult for people to engage in unpaid activities; and low levels of public trust in the aftermath of war (Bosnia), armed conflict (Macedonia) and political upheavals (Serbia). Local NGOs, therefore, face a number of challenges: firstly, the need to reorganise as traditional sources of funding dry up and prominent activists leave the NGO scene; secondly, the need to shift their focus away from humanitarian assistance to broader

---

1 For the sake of simplicity, Bosnia & Herzegovina in the following is referred to as Bosnia.
2 Civil society may be defined as “that set of diverse non-governmental institutions, which is strong enough to counterbalance the state and, while not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can nevertheless prevent it from dominating and atomising the rest of society”. (Gellner, 1994: 5). For a discussion of the use of the concept “civil society” in post-communist states, see Belloni (2000).
civil society issues; and thirdly, the need to improve their relationship with the general public and thus enhance NGO legitimacy.

This article addresses the third of these challenges by examining public perceptions of: (1) NGOs in Bosnia, Serbia and Macedonia and (2) the scope for closer public involvement in the activities of local NGOs in the region. Both issues are important, particularly with a view to establishing the future potentials of NGOs—in terms of availability of prospective activists; NGOs’ legitimacy; and their capacity to build civil society by engaging in a dialogue with and fronting issues of importance to the general public. The issues are also important for the NGOs in terms of designing strategies for how to improve relations with the general public and thus enhance public trust in and support for the NGO sector as such.

Chandler’s and Howard’s findings might lead one to conclude that the potential for improving the relationship between NGOs and the general public in the West Balkans is limited and that the future of local NGOs looks bleak. Below we will argue that their future appears to be somewhat brighter. Despite widespread scepticism of NGOs amongst the general public and despite low levels of public participation in the region, members of the general public do acknowledge the achievements of local NGOs. Besides, despite current low levels of public participation, there is considerable interest in and will to join local NGOs, should the opportunity to do so arise.

The first part of the paper looks at how the general public obtains information about NGOs and also at their understanding of NGOs as a concept. In the second part public perceptions of NGOs as such, as well as the focus group participants’ personal views on NGOs are addressed. The third part of the paper explores the willingness of focus group participants to join NGOs—and the reasons they give for wishing/not wishing to join them. Finally, the future potential and role of local NGOs are examined based on the findings presented in the previous parts of the paper.

Methodology

The focus group discussions referred to above were carried out as part of a three year project entitled “NGO Bargaining Power in South East Europe,” focusing on NGOs in Serbia, Bosnia and Macedonia as well as on their interaction with the general public, local government officials and the international donor community.

3 Under broader civil society issues we mean mobilisation of the general public to promote the interests of vulnerable groups in society, engage in lobbying, promote greater public participation in the political discourse, make efforts to improve inter-ethnic relations, and the like.

4 Our point is that the NGOs should act as a vehicle for political change, by channeling public grievances in such way that the state structures has no choice but to resolve them. This is an issue which has been, and still is, debated by academics engaging in research on civil society. Public grievances differ by country and over time, and it is not the issues as such but the process, that is, the fronting of these issues, that we are interested in.

5 The project is funded by the Norwegian Council of Research (Project no 15049/730) and carried out by Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research in collaboration with Argument (Serbia), Prism Research (Bosnia), and Pro Media (Macedonia).
As part of the project, a total of 24 focus group discussions were conducted with the general public in late 2003/early 2004. Ten focus groups were organised in Serbia, seven in Bosnia and seven in Macedonia. In Serbia focus groups were interviewed in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Užice, Požarevac and Bujanovac. Novi Sad was selected as it is Serbia’s second largest town. It is located in Vojvodina (one of Serbia’s two autonomous provinces), has a sizable ethnic Hungarian community (Svanberg and Sőhrman, 1996, p. 170) and was ruled by the opposition during the last years of the Milošević regime (Crampton, 2002, p. 278). It is also economically in a much better position than most other parts of the country. Belgrade and Novi Sad are both large cities. We therefore also selected two small towns—Požarevac and Užice—for our sample. Požarevac is Milošević’s home town and was ruled by pro-Milošević supporters until 2000, whereas Užice is a typical Serbian small town. Finally, Bujanovac was added to the sample as (1) it is a small town located in Serbia’s poorest region in the South, and (2) is inhabited primarily by ethnic Albanians. In addition, it has a fairly large ethnic Roma community.

The focus groups in Bosnia took place in Sarajevo, Mostar (Federation), Banja Luka (Republika Srpska) and Brecko (Brcko district)—that is, in each of Bosnia’s three entities. Our choice of locations allowed for a comparison of (1) the views and experiences of Christians (ethnic Serbs and Croats) and Muslims in two entities (the Federation and the Brecko District) and two cities within the Federation—i.e. Sarajevo, where ethnic divisions have subsided more, and Mostar, where ethnic tensions have subsided less since the end of the civil war; (2) the views of ethnic Serbs in all three entities (the Federation, Republika Srpska and Brcko District).

The Macedonian focus groups were carried out in Skopje, Kumanovo, Gostivar, Štip and Bitola. By selecting these locations, we were able to investigate public perceptions of NGOs in the capital, and in northern, western, eastern and southern parts of the country. Kumanovo is ethnically mixed and fighting took place close to this town during the 2001 armed insurgency (Philips, 2004, pp. 103–7). Skopje and Gostivar both have large ethnic Albanian communities, thus allowing for a comparison of the views of ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. Our choice of locations also allowed us to compare public perceptions in towns that have benefited more (Gostivar and Kumanovo) and less (Štip and to some extent also Bitola) from international financial and humanitarian assistance in recent years. None of the towns included in our sample—with the exception of Skopje—are particularly well off, though Bitola derives some economic benefits from its close proximity to the Greek border.

We invited a total of ten people to attend each focus group. Of these, five had previous contact with NGOs whereas five did not. We also sought to ensure a reasonably balanced mix between males and females, older and younger people and people

---

6 In addition, we conducted 18 focus group interviews with NGO representatives (late 2002), 70 in-depth interviews with local government officials (late 2002/early 2003) and 60 in-depth interviews with representatives of the international community (late 2002).

7 Most focus groups discussions were conducted with 7–8 participants, as not all those invited to attend showed up.
with higher and lower education. Most focus groups were composed of the titular ethnic group. In areas with large ethnic minority groups we did some ethnically mixed (ethnic Serbs and Hungarians in Novi Sad; ethnic Macedonians, Albanians and Roma in Kumanovo; ethnic Serbs and Roma in Bujanovac) and some ethnically homogeneous focus groups (Albanians and Macedonians in Skopje; Albanians and Macedonians in Gostivar; Serbs, Roma and Albanians in Bujanovac). In all Bosnian focus groups’ locations, except Banja Luka, we conducted one focus group with Christians and one focus group with Muslims.

Each focus group was interviewed in the local language by professional moderators according to a focus group guide and lasted, on the average, for 2.5 h. Each group was both video- and audio-taped. Complete transcripts of the focus group discussions were translated into English and later coded in QSR NUD*IST (version 4) according to a detailed coding scheme. We defined the text unit—the basic unit to be coded—as a focus group participant’s answer to a question or comment to somebody else’s statement, starting when the focus group participant began to speak and finishing when he/she either stopped talking or was interrupted either by the moderator or by another focus group participant.

Once the data-set had been coded, we recorded the total number of text units coded at each node and percentaged them. This allowed us to create comparative tables based on numerical findings from the three national data sets. Analysing qualitative data statistically is in itself not sufficient, however. To give an example, several focus group participants may hold the view that NGOs are a negative phenomenon. Still, they may have different opinions as to why or in what way NGOs are negative.

---

Footnotes:

8 Each focus group participant was asked beforehand to fill in a short questionnaire. This allowed us to verify that he/she corresponded to the criteria according to which they had been recruited. In Bosnia, some of the people who showed up for the focus groups did not match the selection criteria and were subsequently asked to leave.

9 As tensions between ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Serbs in Novi Sad are not very pronounced, we decided to do a mixed focus group rather than two separate focus groups there. We followed a similar approach in Kumanovo, where our focus group was attended by ethnic Macedonians, ethnic Albanians and ethnic Roma. Both focus groups were monitored by video link by Grodeland and none of the focus group participants appeared to feel uncomfortable by the fact that the groups were ethnically mixed. In Bujanovac we first did one ethnically mixed focus group to which we invited an equal number of ethnic Serbs and ethnic Roma, and a separate focus group with ethnic Albanians. We thereafter did separate focus groups within the three ethnic communities. The findings presented in this article cover all 24 focus groups.

10 The guide consisted of seven main sections: (1) general attitudes towards the socio-economic situation; (2) general attitudes towards local government officials; (3) general attitudes towards the international community; (4) NGOs and their role in a (COUNTRY) and in (FG LOCATION); (5) NGOs in (FG LOCATION) and their interaction with the general public; (6) the focus group participants’ personal experience with NGOs; and (7) how to improve the relationship between NGOs and the general public.

11 Some double-coding did occur in cases when a focus group participant’s answer to a question addressed issues covered by more than one node (variable). In some cases focus group participants provided answers to some questions while answering different questions. In such cases more than one answer from one and the same focus group participant were coded at the same node. Furthermore, not all the focus group participants answered or commented on each question raised by the moderator. The total number of text units ($N$) in the tables shown here therefore does not always correspond to the total number of focus group participants interviewed.
To get the full picture, it is necessary to combine the statistical findings with a content analysis of what the focus group participants actually said. Findings from this combined analysis are presented below: numerical findings are presented in table form and “illustrated” by quotations from the focus group discussions.

To establish whether factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion, education and income influenced the focus group participants’ personal attitudes to NGOs, we created independent variables by using background information collected about each focus group participant in questionnaires filled in by them before the discussion started. We cross-tabulated these variables with the dependent variables—that is, the nodes containing the answers to questions asked during the focus group discussions. The total number of text units retrieved from each cross-tabulation was later percentaged.

NGOs: Background

NGOs in the traditional Western sense did not emerge in the former Republic of Yugoslavia until the late 1980s. Whereas the earliest organisations that appeared (Slovenia) succeeded in mobilising the general public in support of their demands, those that appeared in Bosnia were mostly elitist and lacked popular appeal. They started as youth initiatives supported by intellectuals and were largely influenced by Slovenian demands for civil society (Andjelic, 2003, pp. 81–82). Bosnian NGOs succeeded in raising discussions on several issues and also focused their attention on human rights and environmental issues—though these initiatives came to a halt at the onset of war. During and after the civil war a number of Western style NGOs emerged—but mostly to distribute humanitarian aid to the victims of war rather than to make political demands.

Serbian civil society organisations, on their part, also started out as human rights organisations. They were successful in mobilising the general public against...
Milošević in the late 1990s but have failed to mobilise similar support for their current agendas to the same extent.¹⁶ In this sense there are similarities between many Serbian NGOs and the Ukrainian Green Movement—“Želenyi Svit”. They were against something—the Serbian NGOs were against Milošević, the Ukrainian Greens were against the construction of more nuclear reactors in Ukraine. They were successful—Milošević was ousted from power; plans to construct new nuclear reactors in Ukraine were scrapped—and they have later found it difficult to regroup and shift their focus to other issues (Grødeland, 1996). New NGOs have also emerged, though many in response to Western financial assistance made available to Serbia after Milošević’ fall from power. The most successful Serbian NGO—G17+—has transformed itself into one of Serbia’s leading political parties.

The Macedonian NGO scene is more similar to that of Bosnia than Serbia. From 1995 onwards, donor funding has boosted the number of officially registered NGOs from about 300 to more than 4000 (Cook, 2002). A Freedom House report published in 1998 claimed that “much of the country’s charitable and humanitarian work, including medical assistance and aid to refugees, is overseen by international groups that work with indigenous groups or volunteers” (Freedom House, 1998). Macedonian NGOs have received considerable assistance from abroad, but “have failed to prove that they are achieving worthwhile results” (Cook, 2002).

NGOs: What they are and how to obtain Information about them

As noted above, Chandler (1999) claims that NGOs in Bosnia have not had to develop public support for their activities. Most NGOs—be it in the West Balkans or elsewhere—identify target groups, that is, groups to be assisted in one way or another. Such groups may benefit materially, may receive advice about their rights, and possibilities, or may be assisted in terms of advocacy-work—that is, interest representation. Members of these target groups are likely to have an understanding of NGOs as a concept. But what about the public at large? How do they obtain information about NGOs? And do they actually know the meaning of “NGOs” as a concept?

Obtaining information about NGOs

The focus groups that included NGOs’ representatives were conducted before the focus groups with the members of the general public. The former suggested that NGOs are having some problems getting information about their activities across to the general public. In the view of some NGO representatives, local media is often not interested in covering activities organised by NGOs. Or they demand money for this—money which the local NGOs often do not have. Lack of funds also prevents many NGOs from preparing information materials about themselves. We therefore

¹⁶ For an account of nationalist NGOs that appeared in Serbia during the last years of Milošević’s rule, see Bieber, 2000.
asked the participants of the focus groups with the general public how they obtained information about the activities of NGOs in the locations where they live. As can be seen from Table 1, focus group participants in Serbia tended to obtain information about NGOs from the media, whereas in Bosnia and Macedonia it was more common to learn about NGOs from other people—and frequently from friends or relatives. An explanation for this may be that a larger number of NGOs in Serbia are more activist-like and thus also more in the public eye, than NGOs in Bosnia and Macedonia.

Those focus group participants who thought people obtained information about NGOs primarily through others suggested that the latter were usually known to them in one way or the other—and in most cases they were friends. They also heard about NGOs from colleagues or as hearsay. The latter was particularly common in smaller places where most people tended to know each other: “I heard they are giving a donation for reconstruction, I heard from my friend. It is easy to hear things in Mostar...” (Mo-Mu, P5); “accidentally, from colleagues at work, when they were talking...” (št, P5); “since Gostivar is a small town, information travels from person to person, friend to friend, everyone here knows everyone” (Go-A, P7).

Focus group participants in Serbia in most cases obtained information about NGOs from television and newspapers. These also turned out to be important sources of information for focus group participants in Macedonia and Bosnia. In Serbia, though to a lesser extent: “media outlets at the local level in Kumanovo cover those NGO activities...” (Ku, P4); “there is a lot of it in the media...” (Sa-Mu, P4); “organisations place ads in the newspapers ... you can see exhibitions, promotions, panel discussions. It’s shown on television.” (Už, P2); “(people receive information about the NGOs) mostly from the radio, from the media mostly.” (Br-S, P4).

Those focus group participants in Serbia who said they obtained relevant information from the NGOs themselves frequently did so through magazines, newsletters and newspapers presented and distributed by the NGOs, but also at NGO seminars. NGOs in Macedonia provided the public with information about their activities by distributing flyers and leaflets or by making direct contact with people. Focus group participants from Bosnia also to some extent obtained information directly from the NGOs: “the NGO information centre ... has had its own magazine for ten years now. I have an opportunity to read every number of that magazine—it is published twice a month...” (Be-L, P9); “flyers, leaflets are distributed ... they are delivered in high numbers...” (Go-M, P6); it’s mostly done at seminars. Roma non-governmental

---

17 The text in the brackets indicate that the quote is from the first of the two focus groups carried out in Mostar and P5 indicates that it was made by focus group participant no 5. The following shortenings have been used for quotations: Be (Belgrade), NS (Novi Sad), Už (Užice), Po (Požarevac), Bu (Bujanovac), Sa (Sarajevo), Mo (Mostar), BL (Banja Luka), Br (Brcko), Sk (Skopje), Ku (Kumanovo), Go (Gostivar), Št (Štip) and Bi (Bitola). To indicate the ethnicity of the focus group participants, the following indicators have been added: S (Serbs), A (Albanians), R (Roma), S&R (Serbs and Roma) and M (Macedonians). In Bosnia we found it useful to distinguish between Christians (ethnic Serbs, ethnic Croats), marked as Ch and Muslims, marked as Mu. As there is no significant ethnic minority in Belgrade, we did one focus group with higher educated (H) and one with lower educated (L) people.
organisations invite Roma to seminars...” (Bu-R, P2); “these NGO people came to our house and gave us their signed cheques as social benefit...” (Ku, P7).

Views were divided amongst the focus group participants in Serbia and Macedonia, however, on how accessible information disseminated directly from the NGOs themselves to the general public was. Those who thought that such information was difficult to obtain, believed the problem was in the “closedness” of the NGOs themselves: “the main information is somewhat hidden, it is kept because of their personal interests.” (Št, P5); “... we really are not informed and we cannot acquire such information because it is a certain circle of people...” (Bu—S&R, P2); “they (NGOs) even hide, so you cannot find them.” (Št, P6).

Quite a few focus group participants in Macedonia thought the issue was not only how accessible information about NGOs was to the general public, but rather how interested people were in expanding their knowledge of NGOs in the first place: “primarily the person should be interested. If the person wants, he/she can find the information and most of us know exactly where certain NGOs are located. I think it’s easy.” (Go-M, P5); “if someone wants (to) it is not difficult to find their offices. I can find them” (Sk-A, P7).

**Defining NGOs**

As noted above, we sought to ensure that half of our focus group participants had previously been in contact with NGOs and that the other half had not. Given that some people invited to take part in the discussions failed to show up or ended up not taking part in the focus group discussion because they did not fit the criteria, in some focus groups there was a slight lack of balance between those who had been in contact with and those who had not been in contact with NGOs. Still, as can be seen from Table 2, an overwhelming majority of the focus group participants claimed to be familiar with local NGOs—even some of those who had not personally been in contact with them.

Despite their self-proclaimed familiarity with NGOs, however, most focus group participants had some problems defining NGOs—particularly in Serbia: “to tell you the truth, I am not clear about them myself. I don’t have a definition for something

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Ways in which the general public obtains information about local NGOs (in per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Serbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the NGOs</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From other people</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the media</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(91)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N, number of text units coded at “ways in which the general public obtains information about local NGOs.” As numbers are rounded up or down, they do not always add up to 100. A majority of the text units coded as “other” in Serbia focused on Serbian people’s general lack of knowledge about NGOs more than on alternative ways in which to obtain information about NGOs.
like that, for an NGO.” (Be-H, P8); “the expression non-governmental organisation, I don’t know its meaning…” (Bu-S&R, P5); “we don’t have the slightest idea.” (NS, P9).

A few focus group participants in all countries, however, were able to provide a fairly accurate definition of NGOs as organisations being non-governmental and not-for-profit: “NGOs, those are organisations that are not influenced by the government, which is a positive thing…” (Br-S, P2); “NGOs are non-profit and non-governmental.” (Bu-A, Dec, P3); “they don’t look for profit… they are looking for (the) truth…” (Mo-Ch, P6).

Some of the focus group participants in Serbia who knew that NGOs are essentially non-governmental organisations pointed out that the very notion of something being “non-governmental” has negative connotations in their country: “this might be a relic from the old times. When you say that something is “non-governmental” it’s negative, something fighting against the authorities and therefore I think that this is a wrong expression. “Association of citizens” sounds much better.” (Be-H, P2); “when you say non-governmental, it’s not of the government. Well, many people have a negative opinion about them thinking that they are against the government.” (Bu, S, P7).

The majority of the focus group participants in all countries, however, found it somewhat difficult to define NGOs. Some focus group participants in Bosnia and Serbia held the view that NGOs were essentially organisations uniting a group of individuals and that these people shared a common goal: “(an NGO is a) group of individuals.” (Sa-Ch, P4); “… it’s about people gathered round some idea, a group of people who have the same objective.” (Sa-Mu, P8).

Others (Serbia) had problems distinguishing between NGOs on the one hand, and citizens’ associations, on the other.18 To some, NGOs and citizens’ associations were essentially one and the same thing, whereas others thought there were differences between the two in terms of size, type of goals sought and also in terms of funding: “non-governmental organisations should be associations of citizens … these are either people gathered around particular problems or groups of experts especially motivated to work on resolving an issue.” (Be-H, P2); “I’ll tell you—(an) NGO is

---

18 Most independent organisations and movements of citizens were banned in Yugoslavia after the Second World War. Only organisations that did not address political and social issues were allowed to operate. These included professional organisations (so called citizens’ associations) cultural organisations, folkloristic organisations and sport clubs. (Bieber, 2000).
A group of people, let’s say five of them, who work... they offer some service to the citizens. The citizens’ association is a bigger group of people who fight for their own aims... it seems to me that (the NGO) fights for some general aims, it means not exactly theirs (their own personal aims), but mostly citizens’ demands.” (NS, P2); “Initially, the associations of citizens are set up to help their members, that is, themselves. That is how I see it.” (Po, P7); “NGOs are those organisations established by government, in other words by the system... the government didn’t establish the citizens’ organisations.” (NS, P5).

Although providing accurate and detailed definitions of NGOs turned out to be difficult for most of the focus group participants in all the countries, they were still able to identify one or more features that in their view were characteristic of NGOs. Focus group participants in Serbia and Macedonia pointed out that NGOs are established with a view to achieve specific aims: “(NGOs engage in) humanitarian activities... aid to the disabled” (Be-H, P10); “… the majority of NGOs is committed to the protection of human rights one way or the other.” (Be-H, P7); “(NGOs should) participate in making laws later on to enter parliamentary procedure.” (Be-H, P1); “the end goal is to help and satisfy, in a way, people’s needs.” (Go-A, P5).

Focus group participants in all the countries thought NGOs are essentially non-political organisations. To some in Serbia and Bosnia this meant that NGOs were not funded by the state budget. To others—and in all the countries—it meant that NGOs were either not affiliated with or influenced by political parties. Some participants even claimed that NGOs had no contact with political parties or official structures at all: “it doesn’t have anything to do with the government budget...” (Už, P6); “… it’s not related to government in any way.” (Br-Mu, P6); “… an organisation which is not influenced by any party...” (Mo-Mu, P5); “not to be connected with any political party, not to get the money from any political party.” (NS, P10); “well, they don’t have anything to do with politics.” (Mo-Ch, P8).

Some focus group participants in Bosnia questioned where the NGOs obtained their funding from, given that they were non-governmental organisations. Others suggested that NGOs were foreign institutions—a view held also by one of the focus group participants in Macedonia: “I was never clear on what the construct of NGO means. As soon as something is not governmental, somebody has to finance it. Who is the one who finances it and what is his name?” (BL, P4); “I understand that all non-governmental organisations are from abroad.” (Bu, S&R, P3); “… the NGOs are like the extended hand of governmental institutions from the West...” (Go-M, P4).

Although some focus group participants held the view that NGOs should have no contact with government institutions at all, these were in the minority. Focus group participants in Serbia and Bosnia emphasised the important task NGOs performed in terms of assisting local government institutions that lack the capacity to carry out all their duties. A fair share of the focus group participants in Serbia and Macedonia pointed out that if local government was unable to address certain issues, NGOs should take responsibility for these—in other words to act as a substitute for local government: “... currently we see an NGO only as an institution which will provide us with assistance and which will provide assistance to the government, which will plug the holes and patch things up.” (Be-H, P5); “they unite citizens in
resolving some issues ... the government and the public sector have a lot to do and are not capable of covering everything.” (Už, P8); “NGOs work on something that the government itself cannot do, is unable to do or doesn’t know how to do ...” (Go-A, P5).

Some of the focus group participants in Serbia emphasised the monitoring function performed by many NGOs, whereas focus group participants in Bosnia and Macedonia advocated NGOs’ role as a local government corrective: “(NGOs should have) a monitoring function ... to monitor and remind the authorities.” (Be-H, P7); “the goal of these NGOs is to put pressure on government...” (Sk-A, P4); “well, I think that (they) should ... control ... the state (that is, state institutions) and everything of power...” (Be-H, P6).

Focus group participants in Bosnia and Macedonia pointed out the important role NGOs performed in terms of providing a link between the general public and local government, by raising important issues in public: “... briefly, (the NGO) is a connection between common persons and government...” (BL, P5); “they should present all the problems the citizens have or should put them in the foreground: environmental issues, water pollution, air pollution, or those relating to human rights protection ... at the same time NGOs should assist the government to solve the problems, to be a bridge, so to say, between the government and its people.” (Ku, P4).

To sum up, although a majority of our focus group participants said they were familiar with NGOs, they still found it hard to define them. Still, most participants were able to identify one or two features typical of NGOs. At first glance this might seem rather peculiar. However, it might be useful to keep in mind that people living in West European countries often find it difficult to define democracy as a concept, although they are well aware of what living in a democracy actually entails.¹⁹ Thus, although most of our focus group participants found it difficult to provide accurate definitions of NGOs, they still demonstrated a fairly good understanding of the term.

Public perceptions of NGOs

As can be seen from Table 3, focus group participants in Serbia were predominantly negative to NGOs. Focus group participants in Bosnia and Macedonia, on the other hand, were rather positive.

Most statements made by focus group participants in Bosnia and Macedonia suggested that they were favourable towards NGOs because they help people,²⁰ because

¹⁹ E-mail communication with Professor Valerie Bunce, 8 August 2005.
²⁰ This is perhaps not so surprising, given that NGOs particularly in Bosnia but also to some extent in Serbia and Macedonia have been turned into cheap implementing agencies for the international community. The international community arrived in the Balkans with an agenda and the required funds, but without the capacity to implement this agenda on their own. Existing local NGOs, as well as new NGOs that emerged in response to the international community’s need for local collaborators, were therefore given money to implement projects that reflected this agenda and/or to distribute humanitarian aid as this worked out cheaper than contracting foreign NGOs/organisations to do the same job (Smillie, 1991).
they represent a positive phenomenon or because they raise issues, thus promoting civil society.

Focus group participants in Serbia who were positive towards NGOs either did not state a reason or almost exclusively focused on the results the NGOs had achieved. Quite a few focus group participants were also favourable towards NGOs for political reasons—pointing out the important role of the NGOs during Milošević’s ouster from power in October 2000 (Table 4). Those focus group participants in all the countries who were positive towards NGOs because they help people or because they achieve results, referred to specific NGOs and provided examples of how they had helped people or done something positive in/for their local communities: “I have heard about ‘Save the Children’. I like the fact that they help children and I think their work is very positive…” (Br-S, P8); “INES, MAJKA—these are worthy of praise: they have distributed packages to displaced persons.” (Ku, P5); “these non-governmental … organisations helped to paint our school.” (Už, P8).

Some of the Bosnian and Macedonian focus group participants said they were favourable towards NGOs because the NGOs in their view represent something positive. Some also expressed the view that NGOs are needed as they provide locals with an income: “NGOs are honest, fair.” (Mo-Mu, P8); “I’d just like to commend

Table 3
The focus group participants’ perceptions of NGOs (in per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Serbia</th>
<th>Bosnia</th>
<th>Macedonia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NGOs represent something positive</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs represent something negative</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed feelings</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(77)</td>
<td>(142)</td>
<td>(68)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N is made up of the total number of text units coded at “focus group participants’ perceptions of NGOs.” As numbers are rounded up or down, they do not always add up to 100.

Table 4
The focus group participants’ reasons for perceiving the NGOs positively (in per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Serbia</th>
<th>Bosnia</th>
<th>Macedonia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help people</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are a positive phenomenon</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote civil society</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are needed</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give people an income</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieve results</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are good for political reasons</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are good (no reason stated)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(22)</td>
<td>(62)</td>
<td>(39)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N is made up of the total number of text units coded at “reasons for perceiving NGOs positively.” As numbers are rounded up or down, they do not always add up to 100.
their presence here.” (Sa-Mu, P1); “I support them. I don’t know about my parents.” (Bu-A-Dec, P6); “considering our situation … we need them.” (Mo-Ch, P2); “probably every one of us knows somebody who worked or still works in those organisations. Friends, family, acquaintances. So we know about their salaries … lots of people have terrific incomes.” (Sa-Ch, P3).

NGOs were also seen as having a positive impact on the country’s general political climate in Macedonia. Focus group participants residing in ethnically mixed areas talked about the efforts of local NGOs to promote inter-ethnic dialogue in very positive terms: “Macedonia is in such a situation that these NGOs are a good thing.” (Go-M, P8); “I think that NGOs do good things, they develop some projects and help … improve multi-ethnic relations.” (Go-A, P4); “I think the NGOs are a good thing both for the state and for the town of Kumanovo … here we have people of Macedonian and Albanian ethnic affiliations. Also of Turkish ethnic affiliation. I think that the main task of these NGOs is to establish communication among these peoples…” (Ku, P2).

Besides, some focus group participants in Macedonia expressed the view that NGOs are inclusive, whereas one of the Serb participants thought they are courageous: “I think the structure of the NGOs is good. They are non-political organisations, non-government and non-religious. This structure embraces everyone: men and women, young and old, intellectuals and non-intellectuals. I think all that is positive…” (Go-A, P1); “NGOs gather a certain number of people … that is positive.” (St, P5); “it really took courage to take part in some civic initiatives … since everyone had anti-Western attitude and distrust…” (Be-H, P9).

As noted above, Bosnian and Macedonian focus group participants were predominantly favourably disposed towards local NGOs. Still, they also made more critical remarks, as did the majority of the focus group participants in Serbia. Belloni (2000) argues that frequently NGOs are contractors, customers are constituencies, while members become employees. Top down planning, top down funding and upward accountability negates participation, facilitates secrecy and closedness and that “NGOs compete with each other for limited funds.” (p. 20, p. 29). As can be seen from Table 5, the perceived “closedness” of NGOs contributed to a negative assessment of NGOs in all countries. However, it was not the most important reason in any of them.

In Serbia the perceived politicisation of the country’s NGOs was a reason—as a matter of fact, the most important reason—why a majority of the focus group participants were negative towards them. In addition, they were sceptical of NGOs because of their apparent lack of results. Focus group participants in Bosnia, on their part, claimed that the general lack of trust in Bosnian society—probably brought about as a result of civil war and international rule—also reflected negatively on the NGOs. Finally, several of the Macedonian focus group participants were simply negative towards NGOs without giving any reason.

Focus group participants in Serbia and Bosnia who said they did not trust NGOs for political reasons either felt that NGOs in their countries were more politicised than they ought to be, or that they were not sufficiently nationalist in their approach: “I don’t have complete trust (in NGOs). G17, what was it? It turned out to be
a super-political party! I don’t like that kind of skipping ... it is deluding to the people.’’ (Be-L, P7); “all organisations have some kind of pressure from (the) parties ... so I am not interested in (them).” (Mo-Mu, P4); “there are some national organisation(s), which I watch on television ... I heard some words that were spoken, maybe recklessly ... something that seemed to me as directed against the Serbian people ... (the NGOs should) have a bit more ... nationalism.” (Po, P4).

Focus group participants in all the countries also noted that NGOs often failed to achieve results, and to the extent they did, that only a limited number of people benefited from these: “Well, I’m completely dissatisfied—because they talk a lot and do nothing.” (Be-L, P7); “(only) a small number of those people for which the project really is needed are using it ... the biggest part of the project goes to the NGOs themselves, the President, I should say, of that NGO and the closest ones around him. Let me give you an example: (the) NGO for Roma rights. How are they going to solve them (that is, the problems the Roma face) when the president of the NGO employs his wife and there is absolutely no Roma staff! How can they solve Roma issues?...” (St, P6); “non-governmental organisations ... cannot do anything.” (BL, P8).

Yet others thought NGOs were essentially selfish and closed organisations, putting their own well-being before the well-being of their target groups: “today you don’t know—all are thieves.” (Be-L, P7); “my opinion is that the leaders of those NGOs in 50 to 100 per cent of the cases use the NGOs as their own private companies. The money they receive from foreign donations—I think they divide them or use them for their personal needs...” (Sk-A, P2); “I know one organisation. They were supposed to send people from poor families abroad. But mostly they were sending people from their (own) families ... only a few of those children were from poor families.” (Mo-Ch, P9).

NGOs were seen as biased (all the countries), as not trustworthy organisations (Serbia and Bosnia), as organisations failing to give sufficient attention and consideration to local needs (Serbia), and as organisations promoting a Western agenda.
(Macedonia): “NGOs cause some kind of damage, too…” (Sa-Mu, P4); “distrust took (hold of) us here. The post-war period took us to a point where we always think that we are fooled. There is distrust.” (Mo-Mu, P3); “they should have contacted us and asked about our needs…” (Bu-S, P8); “NGOs have the same role as the Christians in Latin America, they are persuading the Indians to adopt a new way of life … they are the Christians, those with good souls … the West soiled us emotionally. I think that the NGOs are like the extended hand of the governmental institutions from the West … NGOs … pollute (us) emotionally … we are conscious beings that don’t need NGOs.” (Go-M, P4).

Some of the Bosnian focus group participants even claimed that NGOs were engaged in criminal activities: “well, of course they have been founded for money laundry.” (Sa-Ch, P1); “everyone who has money will found (an NGO). Those for clearing mines … there are as many of them as you can wish. What amount of money has been “washed” there? Somebody should check it out.” (Sa-Ch, P1).

Factors influencing the focus group participants’ views on NGOs

To find out to which extent factors such as age, education and ethnicity had a bearing on our focus group participants’ attitudes towards NGOs, we cross-tabulated these independent variables with the focus group participants’ positive and negative statements about NGOs.21

Age

We sought to ensure an even mix of younger and older people in our focus groups. Still, a large majority were to be found in the age bracket 18 to 50. The average age of the focus group participants in Serbia was 35.6 years, in Bosnia 30.9 years and in Macedonia 33.4 years.22

Although the majority of the focus group participants were under the age of 50, this did not prevent us from comparing the actual statements made by people belonging to different age groups to check whether their age had a bearing on their personal attitudes towards NGOs. We therefore cross-tabulated our three age variables with the “personal attitude to NGOs positive” and “personal attitudes to NGOs negative”-variables.

21 We also checked for gender, income and previous versus no previous contact with NGOs. While gender did not have any significant impact on the focus group participants’ views of NGOs, income and exposure to NGOs had an effect—but not a clear and easily interpretable one—and are therefore not included in this article.

22 In Serbia those between 18 and 30 years old accounted for 40 per cent of the focus group participants, the middle-aged (those between the ages of 31 and 50) accounted for 44 per cent, whereas the old (those older than 50) made up 13 per cent of the total. Two per cent of the focus group participants failed to give their age. In Bosnia 48 per cent of the focus group participants were young, 43 were middle-aged, 2 per cent were old and 7 per cent failed to give their age. The majority of the focus group participants in Macedonia were young (48 per cent), whereas the middle-aged made up 41 per cent and the old 11 per cent of the total.
For Serbia we found that the younger the focus group participant, the more positive he/she appeared to be with regard to NGOs. Some 80 per cent of the statements made by the youngest focus group participants about their personal attitudes towards the NGOs were positive, compared to only 37 per cent of those made by the middle-aged and 16 per cent of those made by the older participants.

This is perhaps not so surprising since NGO as a concept is rather new to the countries of former Yugoslavia. As noted above, the first Western-style NGOs emerged in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Young people have thus grown up with NGOs in their midst, whereas older people may be less accustomed to them. Besides, old NGO activists are less common than younger ones and older people tend to be more conservative than younger people.

Given that local NGOs played an active and important role in removing Milošević from power in October 2000 and that the student movement, Otpor, was one of the key NGOs in the anti-Milošević coalition (Crampton, 2002; 272–83), it could well be that the younger focus group participants in Serbia were more anti-Milošević than the older ones and for this reason more favourable towards NGOs in general. To some extent our data allows us to draw such a conclusion: some 50 per cent of the statements made by the young focus group participants suggested that they simply supported the NGOs, without giving any explicit reason for their support.

The middle aged and the old, on their part, were favourable towards NGOs because “NGOs help people”. This is perhaps not so surprising, given that older people are more likely to suffer from poor health or have socio-economic problems than younger people, and thus either themselves belong to or know people who belong to those groups targeted by NGO.

We also found a rather big difference between the young and middle aged focus group participants in Macedonia: whereas 79 per cent of all statements made by the youngest focus group participants were favourable towards NGOs, this was the case with only 54 per cent of those statements made by the middle-aged focus group participants. All statements made by those aged 50 or more, however, were positive—though there were not so many of these. In Bosnia, there was only a slight difference between the young and the old (45 per cent vs. 50 per cent positive), though the middle-aged were rather more positive than both: 58 per cent of all statements made by these participants were favourable towards NGOs. Thus, in both countries the older the focus group participant, the more likely he or she was to be favourable towards NGOs because they represent something positive.

**Education**

Although we tried to ensure a reasonable mix between higher and lower educated focus group participants, a majority of the participants in all countries had lower,
that is, primary, secondary or vocational, education. Quite a few focus group participants in all the countries were young, first year students. These were included in the "low education"-category, which partly explains why the percentages for low education exceeded those for higher, university, education.25

Education appeared to have an impact on public perceptions of NGOs, as is shown in Tables 6 and 7. Whereas both the higher and lower educated in Bosnia and Macedonia made a larger number of positive than negative statements about NGOs, the percentage of such positive statements was higher amongst the lower than the higher educated. In Serbia, both the higher and lower educated were more unfavourable than favourable towards NGOs—though the higher educated more and the lower educated less. In other words, lower education seems to make people more positive towards NGOs.

Our analysis of the statements that the higher and lower educated actually made about NGOs also produced another interesting finding. The lower educated in Bosnia said they were positive towards NGOs because NGOs help people (64 per cent) and because NGOs represent something positive (36 per cent). The higher educated, on their part, in addition to emphasising the fact that NGOs help people (46 per cent) and that NGOs are positive (29 per cent), also said they were favourable towards them because NGOs raise issues (13 per cent). Thus higher educated focus group participants appear to be favourable towards NGOs also primarily because of their part in building civil society, whereas the lower educated are favourable towards NGOs primarily because of their humanitarian role.

The "civil society"-factor could also be observed in the Macedonian focus groups. Although the majority of the statements made by both the higher and lower educated indicated that they were positive towards NGOs because they represented a positive phenomenon26 a fairly large number of statements made by the higher educated (38 per cent) indicated that they were favourable towards NGOs because they

---

Table 6
The focus group participants’ level of education by personal attitudes to NGOs (in per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Serbia</th>
<th>Bosnia</th>
<th>Macedonia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive to NGOs</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative to NGOs</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(26)</td>
<td>(36)</td>
<td>(39)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N, total number of text units retrieved when cross-tabulating education by "personal attitudes to NGOs." As numbers are rounded up or down, they do not always add up to 100.

25 In Serbia, 42 per cent of the focus group participants had higher and 52 per cent had lower education. Some 6 per cent failed to state their level of education. Some 31 per cent of the focus group participants in Bosnia had higher education, 67 per cent had lower education and 2 per cent failed to provide their level of education. Finally, 33 per cent of the focus group participants in Macedonia were higher educated and 67 per cent had lower education.

26 44 per cent of the statements made by the higher educated and 38 per cent of the statements made by the lower educated.
raise important issues. In comparison only four per cent of the statements made by the lower educated focused on civil society issues. Besides, none of the higher educated focus group participants justified their positive attitude towards NGOs by stating that NGOs improve inter-ethnic relations. Some 21 per cent of the statements made by the lower educated, however, emphasised NGO activities in this area.

Inglehart suggests that NGOs are essentially a middle-class phenomenon. In order to engage in voluntary activities a person should be financially secure and have some spare time. NGO activists in the former Yugoslavia do tend to be highly educated and resourceful people (Andjelic, 2003). Higher educated people may therefore be better informed and also have better access to a variety of sources of information about NGOs than people with lower education. They may also socialise more with NGO members and thus be more aware of the issues raised by NGOs. And they may themselves have more opportunities to find paid employment and thus be in less need of NGO assistance. The lower educated, on the other hand, are likely to be economically worse off and be more likely to benefit from the assistance provided by NGOs. Besides, their expectations of NGOs may be lower than those of the higher educated.

**Ethnicity**

In terms of ethnicity we found significant differences between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Serbs in Serbia and ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians in Macedonia. In both countries ethnic Albanians were more favourable towards NGOs than the titular ethnic group.

---

27 Serbs accounted for 59 per cent and Albanians for 20 per cent of the total number of focus group participants in Serbia. Ethnic Roma made up 13 per cent, Hungarians 4 per cent, Macedonians 1 per cent, Croats 1 per cent and Russians 1 per cent of the total sample. In Macedonia, 59 per cent of the focus group participants were ethnic Macedonian, 31 per cent were Albanian, 6 per cent were Roma, 2 per cent Vlachs and 2 per cent Serbs. In Bosnia 40 per cent of the focus group participants were Bosniaks, that is Muslims, 43 per cent were Serbs and 17 per cent were Croats.
The ethnic Albanian communities both in Serbia and Macedonia are highly concentrated. The Albanians in Serbia are primarily located in the three Southern municipalities of Bujanovac, Mevedja and Presevo. In 1982 ethnic Albanians accounted for 53 per cent of the population in the municipality of Bujanovac, for 30 per cent of the population in the municipality of Mevedja and for 85 per cent in the municipality of Presevo (Poulton, 1994, p. 76). As many ethnic Serbs left the Southern parts of the country following the outbreak of war in Kosovo, ethnic Albanians at present probably account for an even higher share of the population in these three municipalities.

The ethnic Albanian community in Macedonia is concentrated in the West and North-West, along the Albanian border and the border with Kosovo. There is also a large ethnic Albanian community in Skopje, on the North bank of the Vardar river. Officially, the ethnic Albanian community in Macedonia currently accounts for some 23 per cent of the population. Unofficial estimates, however, suggest that the number is considerably higher—possibly as high as 35–48 per cent of Macedonia’s total population and up to 40 per cent of the population of Skopje (Poulton, 1994, p. 186, p. 192). According to the 1981 census, there were 63,000 ethnic Albanians and 18,000 ethnic Macedonians in district of Gostivar. Kumanovo also has a sizeable ethnic Albanian community.

Ethnic Albanians residing in Serbia made much more favourable statements about NGOs than did ethnic Serbs: 71 per cent of the statements made by ethnic Serbs were negative to NGOs, 29 per cent were positive. In contrast, 88 per cent of the statements made by ethnic Albanians were positive and only 13 per cent were negative. In Macedonia, the picture was somewhat different—both ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians made favourable statements about NGOs, though the ethnic Albanians considerably more so (88 per cent positive, 12 per cent negative) than the ethnic Macedonians (65 per cent positive, 35 per cent negative).

How should these findings be interpreted? One explanation may be that the ethnic Albanian communities in both countries have benefited more from international humanitarian and other assistance channelled through local NGOs, than ethnic Serbs and ethnic Macedonians. Following Milošević’s demise from power in 2000, many international, as well as local NGOs have focused their attention on the deprived communities in the South. Similarly, Western parts of Macedonia have benefited from international assistance—a fair share of which has been channelled through local NGOs—following the armed insurgence in 2001.

Another explanation may be that the general conditions of ethnic Albanians in Serbia and Macedonia have improved during recent years. Their relations with the titular group in both countries were strained following the break-up of Yugoslavia.

---

28 This is according to the 1994 census. However, as this census—as well as the 1991 census—was boycotted by the ethnic Albanians, as Albanian migrants who used to live in other parts of Former Yugoslavia have returned to Macedonia and as refugees from Kosovo have also settled in the country, the real figure is thought to be considerably higher (Crampton, 2002: 296; Poulton, 2000: 186).

29 The largest ethnic Albanian community resides in the districts of Tetovo (113,000 Albanians, 38,000 Macedonians), Kicevo (23,000 Albanians, 21,000 Macedonians) and Debar (10,000 Albanians, 2,500 Macedonians). Albanians accounted for 14 per cent of the population of Skopje (Poulton, 1994: 76).
During the Milošević regime ethnic Albanians were prevented from working in local administration in Bujanovac. Besides, levels of unemployment were high and budgetary transfers from Belgrade low. Since 2000 ethnic Albanians have taken up positions in local administration and Belgrade is making an effort to improve the socio-economic situation in the area through a special coordination body set up under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior and located on the premises of the Bujanovac local administration. Ethnic Albanians in the Southern parts of Serbia may therefore feel more positive about their situation than other ethnic groups in Serbia. Although they are still suffering economic hardship, much of the discrimination they suffered under Milošević is gone.

As for the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, following the armed insurgence in 2001, not only the government in Skopje but also various NGOs have paid considerable attention to the country’s ethnic Albanian community. As noted above, focus group participants in the predominantly ethnic Albanian town of Gostivar and the ethnically mixed town of Kumanovo voiced the opinion that NGOs had done much to bring people from the different ethnic communities together. This may, in turn, have made them more favourable to NGOs than ethnic Macedonians.

A third explanation may be that ethnic groups do not feel that their situation has improved, but that they are still being discriminated against and that they have suffered as a result of direct confrontations with the ethnic titular group—which, consequently may cause them to be more complacent and less willing to voice critical views in public in order not to “rock the boat.” This is very much the case with ethnic Uzbeks residing in the Southern parts of Kyrgyzstan (International Crisis Group, 2001) and may also be the case amongst ethnic Albanians residing in Serbia and Macedonia. To the extent this is the case, however, it is probably a more plausible explanation for Serbia, where the ethnic Albanian community is considerably smaller than in Macedonia and where ethnic Albanians are also less educated and worse off economically than those residing in Macedonia.

Finally, in Serbia—and to some extent also in Macedonia—the positive perceptions of NGOs voiced by the focus group participants may be a reflection of the fact that the ethnic Albanian community is small and that people know each other. The focus group participants may therefore personally know ethnic Albanian NGO members—several of whom happen to be respected members of their ethnic communities—and for this reason have felt reluctant to express negative views about their NGOs in front of other ethnic Albanians.

In terms of what the focus group participants actually said, we found little difference between the ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians in Serbia. When ethnic Serbs spoke favourably about NGOs they usually did so by stating that NGOs help people and that they represent something positive. To the extent there was a difference between the views of the ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians, the latter were perhaps somewhat more nuanced in their views: they were favourable towards NGOs as “NGOs help people”, “raise issues” (civil society), “represent something positive” and “show good results”.

In Macedonia, ethnic Macedonians focused more on NGOs results than ethnic Albanians (17 per cent vs. 6 per cent). Ethnic Albanians, on their part, focused more on
the role NGOs played in terms of improving inter-ethnic relations. Only 8 per cent of the positive statements made by ethnic Macedonians referred to NGOs as something positive because NGOs improve inter-ethnic relations. In contrast, some 25 per cent of all positive statements made on NGOs amongst ethnic Albanians singled out the fact that NGOs improve inter-ethnic relations as the reason why they were positive towards NGOs.

NGO membership potential

As noted above, although there is considerable scepticism towards local NGOs in Bosnia, Macedonia and Serbia, NGOs were viewed favourably by several focus group participants. For NGOs to be sustainable, however, positive public attitudes are not sufficient. As activists leave the NGO scene and as international funding gradually decreases, local NGOs will require new activists and alternative sources of funding.

None of the countries of Former Yugoslavia have philanthropic traditions and institutions similar to those of Western European countries (Balkan Community Initiatives Fund BCIF, 2004). Besides, in countries where many people are still plagued by basic subsistence problems, it is more difficult to mobilise citizens in the name of the public good rather than their immediate self-interest. If citizens do not perceive themselves as the source of development or as actively shaping their own community by adopting their goals and strategies, they might see no value in participating in an exogenously driven development project (Belloni, 2000, p. 29, p. 22).

Half of the statements made by the focus group participants in Macedonia indicated that they would like to join an NGO if given the opportunity. Somewhat more than and just about a third of the statements made by the focus group participants in Bosnia and Macedonia suggested the same. Only 2 per cent of the total number of statements made by focus group participants in Serbia, 17 per cent of the statements made in Bosnia and 12 per cent of those made in Macedonia, suggested that the focus group participants would not consider joining an NGO. When asked why people establish NGOs, a majority of the Macedonian focus group participants and also a fairly large share of those in Bosnia, suggested that the main motivation for doing so is the wish to cover personal material needs. One might therefore expect that to the extent our focus group participants would themselves want to join an NGO, their motivation would be similar. Our findings do not support this view, however.

It thus appears that our focus group participants’ motivations for wishing to join local NGOs were clearly more altruistic than those motives they attributed to the people who worked in the already established NGOs—though it is of course possible

---

30 Statements coded as “other” usually referred to (1) whether people in general would want to join an NGO—not the focus group participants themselves, or (2) obstacles (usually NGO-related) preventing people from joining NGOs.
that focus group participants were not entirely honest when answering our question. The major reason given by the focus group participants in Bosnia and Macedonia for wanting to join NGOs was that they would like to help people. The wish to socialise with like-minded people also scored high. Focus group participants in Serbia, on their part, simply stated that they would like to join NGOs, though without giving the reason.

Some focus group participants in all the countries would like to join an NGO in order to help people in need, whereas others primarily wanted to help others because it would allow them to make use of their skills: “I could help. Since I am technically trained, maybe somewhere my help would be needed.” (Sa-Ch, P4); “to help people, that’s the most important.” (Sk-A, P7); “I would always help … old people. I would agree to do that with joy.” (Mo-Mu, P3).

Others were tired of sitting at home all by themselves and would like to join an NGO in order to kill time or to socialise with like-minded people: “I would join mostly because of friendships so that we don’t all sit alone at home. As soon as you hang around, you meet new people, new friends…” (Br-S, P6); “yes, I was thinking (of joining an NGO). Because of the contact with people, the communication and work on joint projects.” (Go-M, P1); “what makes me (want to) join is the thought of helping other people, the friendships inside the NGO and simply that you are with people that are well-mannered, well-cultured and very educated.” (Sk-M, P1); “I have nothing to do all day at home. I would join…” (Sa-Ch, P1).

A fairly sizeable group also saw a possibility to cover material needs, to satisfy non-material needs or simply wanted to join an NGO for no particular reason: “well, of course, first of all I would provide … for myself … and then I would help others, because if you don’t provide for yourself, you cannot provide for someone else, either.” (Br-Mu, P5); “I would get involved to satisfy some needs. Both personal interests and for the environment’s sake.” (Št, P5); “of course we would work because we need the money and we know they (i.e. the NGOs) pay well.” (Bu-S&R, P1); “I have lots of ideas in my head. I’ve been thinking about them and I think that through some NGO I will realise those ideas at some point, through the development of projects.” (Go-M, P2); “I would really like to become an NGO member.” (Sk-A, P1).

Some of the focus group participants in Požarevac (Serbia) who expressed their wish to join an NGO specified some conditions that would have to be met in order for them to join. They would only join if they could work together with people they already knew and trusted: “(I would work for an NGO), but with people I know and with those I am sure would work seriously, not with people I don’t know anything about.” (Po, P1); “I can work with Ljilja and she can work with me because we trust each other about the way and quality of our work.” (Po, P1).

Most of the Bosnian focus group participants and all the focus group participants in Macedonia who stated that they would not join an NGO, explained this by a general lack of time. Some of the Macedonian focus group participants also indicated that they had no interest in working for NGOs, had not considered it or were simply not interested in joining an NGO: “I work so much that I have no time…” (BL, P4); “my other commitments don’t allow me to become more active in the work of the
(NGOs); “I do not have enough spare time to join some NGO.” (Ku, P7); “well, I haven’t thought about it…” (BL, P5); “I wouldn’t (join).” (Sa-Mu, P6); “all organisations have some kind of pressure from (political) parties, politics, so I am not so interested in (joining).” (Mo-Mu, P4).

Conclusions

Although the majority of our focus group participants found it difficult to define NGOs, they still managed to identify several features thought to be inherent in NGOs. Many focus group participants were if not very, then at least reasonably well informed about the activities of local NGOs—though a fair share of them had no knowledge of NGOs at all. Unlike the Serbs, people in Bosnia and Macedonia primarily obtained information about NGOs from other people and through hearsay rather than through the media or from the NGOs themselves. NGOs were by some focus group participants criticised for not being active enough in terms of informing the public about their activities—some even thought the NGOs had no interest in providing such information in the first place.

Focus group participants in Serbia were predominantly negative towards NGOs. Participants in Bosnia and Macedonia, on the other hand, were more favourable in their assessment—the former because they thought NGOs help people, the latter because they perceived NGOs as a positive phenomenon. Those focus group participants in Serbia who were positive to NGOs, either thought they achieved results or failed to give a reason for their positive attitudes to NGOs. Focus group participants who were negative towards NGOs were negative primarily for political reasons, because of the NGOs’ lack of results or because they were seen as selfish/closed (Serbia), because they didn’t trust them (Bosnia) or for no specific reason (Macedonia).

Our focus group participants’ attitudes towards NGOs were to some extent shaped by their age, level of education and ethnic affiliation. In Serbia the younger focus group participants were more favourable towards NGOs than the older participants, whereas the middle-aged were most favourable towards NGOs in Bosnia and least favourable towards NGOs in Macedonia. In terms of education, the higher educated were more likely to be positive towards NGOs because they raise issues (civil society), whereas the lower educated were favourable primarily because NGOs help people (humanitarian aspect). Ethnic Albanians in both Serbia and Macedonia were more positive towards NGOs than the titular ethnic groups.

Several focus group participants indicated that they would themselves want to join an NGO—and the reasons they stated for wishing to do so were slightly more altruistic than the reasons they attributed to those working in established NGOs. Focus group participants in Serbia would simply like to join, whereas the ones in Bosnia and Macedonia would like to join in order to help people. Those who did not want to join either had no time or were not interested in NGOs.

As the number of focus groups we conducted is relatively limited, we cannot claim that our findings are nationally representative. The focus groups were, however, designed in such a way that we have no reason to assume that they are not.
assumption is strengthened by the fact that some of our findings match findings from various surveys carried out in the region over the last few years, thus strengthening not only the validity of those findings but also our assumption that the findings presented above reflect the views not only of the focus group participants themselves, but also of the public in Serbia, Bosnia and Macedonia more generally.

NGOs in the former Yugoslavia are faced with a situation very different from that of NGOs in West European countries. Although NGOs in Serbia, Bosnia and Macedonia have many flaws, it would in our opinion be wrong to expect that the strengthening of civil society in countries in transition has to bring about civil society institutions similar to those existing in old, established democracies that are both politically more stable and materially better off, in order to be labelled “successful.” Thus, perhaps the main issue is not so much what the NGOs do -whether they engage in public debate or provide services— but more whether they are successful in what they are doing and also whether their activities generate public trust and interest in, as well as support for their activities.

As noted initially, Belloni’s suggestion that NGOs in Bosnia—and one may add in Macedonia and Serbia—have never been forced to build their own base of popular support and Howard’s observation that public participation in voluntary organisations in post-communist states is low, may lead one to draw the conclusion that the relationship between the NGOs and the public is weak and that there may be little scope for any improvement. Our findings do not fully support such a conclusion. Although we registered considerable scepticism towards NGOs, there was also a fair amount of sympathy for them as well as for the assistance they have provided to people who have suffered hardship as a result of conflict or war. This—as well as the willingness of quite a few focus group participants to join an NGO, should such an opportunity arise—suggests that NGOs by providing better information about their activities, by engaging in a dialogue with the general public and by being more open to people wishing to join their ranks, do have considerable scope for improving their relationship with the general public and thus also for enhancing both NGO capacity and legitimacy in the region.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the referees as well as Valerie Bunce, Arne Tesli and Aadne Aasland for their valuable comments.

**References**


**Further reading**