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## V. CIVIL SOCIETY AND ANTI-CORRUPTION

Civil society involvement in anti-corruption activities in Bulgaria has a long and strong track record from the late 1990s on, following the establishment of the pilot civil society anti-corruption initiative *Coalition 2000*. Besides direct anti-corruption initiatives, Bulgarian NGOs also contribute indirectly to anti-corruption through pressure for higher transparency and access to information, or even through appealing of specific decisions with high corruption risk (mainly concerning environmental issues).

Practically behind most major policy decisions that have led to the decrease of petty corruption in the past 15 years there has been civil society pressure to first accept that there is a problem, then agree that at least one of the suggested tools works, and finally seek public support in implementing it (despite internal opposition to the measures). The years 2013 – 2014 marked a new wave of rising civil society anti-corruption initiatives but also a maturing of civil society in terms of impact on policy outcomes. Throughout its one year term, the 42-nd Bulgarian parliament and the Bulgarian government it has supported have tried to actively divide civil society by selectively choosing to negotiate legislative and policy changes with conformist and loyal NGOs, while actively trying to discredit others. This policy has ultimately failed, but it has created a rift both between politicians and civil society and within civil society itself.

After the February protests in 2013, many new NGOs were registered in attempt to legitimize new civil society leaders, but more than a year after that, these NGOs are practically non-existent. The political battles and even corruption have been transferred to the NGO level, where some of the NGOs are preserving the original ethos of the civil society and others are simply using these organizational forms and positive reputation of the sector to achieve their illegitimate goals. The June 2014 and follow-up protests saw a new and qualitatively different wave of active involvement of the civil society sector and the formation of new activist groups with high impact potential. Preserving this potential and further developing the organisational potential of the civil society sector in Bulgaria will be one of the main factors in reducing political and administrative corruption in the country.

Although there is rarely corruption within the civil society similar to the one in the public administration (someone paying a bribe to receive a service from an NGO, manipulating procurement procedures leading to loss of public value, receiving a service which is not due, etc.), the public at large is very concerned about the NGO – government relations. Particularly sensitive is the receiving of funds by **quasi-NGOs** established and managed by top-ranked politicians and government officials and/or their relatives, or the so-called capturing

of NGOs, when their agendas are closely aligned with government of the day priorities through lavish funding. Such quasi-NGOs blur the public's perception of the activities of the NGO sector and discredit its credentials as an anti-corruption player.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Most of the cases at the margins of civil society and the government have been discussed in CSD's report from 2010 *Civil Society in Bulgaria: Trends and Risks*.