**Expressions of New Regionalism in the Lower Mekong Region – cooperation between Mekong River Commission and civil society**

**Abstract**

According to the New Regionalism Theory (NRT), which dominates the discourse on regionalism in the recent years, civil society plays a crucial role in decision-making processes on a regional level. Nevertheless, when addressing the South-East Asian (SEA) region in general and the Association of South-East Asian Nations in particular, many researchers claim that the authoritarian nature of some of the countries in SEA imposes limitations on the ability of civil society organizations (CSO’s) to influence regional policy-making processes. At the same time, researches also point out to the increasing role of civil society in decision-making in the Lower Mekong Region - that is a sub-region of SEA.

Existing researches do not provide an answer to the question what is the reasons behind the increasing role of civil society, particularly in the Lower Mekong. They also do not explain how the growing activism is taking place and on which stages in the regional decision-making processes it appears.

The current presentation partially covers the existing research gap by pointing out a dual approach on the part of the region's leading intergovernmental organization, the Mekong River Commission towards engagement with civil society. Based on the analysis of official documents and publication of the Commission from the recent years, the speaker will demonstrate that on the one hand, it has consistently called for stronger cooperation with civil society organizations in decision-making processes, emphasizing the benefits of such interaction for the harmonious development of the region. On the other hand, the Commission does not take any actual steps to implement closer cooperation between the governmental and nongovernmental sectors.

At the same time, the growing activism of the civil society in the Lower Mekong Region has been reflected in the increasing number of regional networks of non-governmental organizations (NGO’s), as well as in their relative success in influencing certain aspects of regional politics. An analysis of the profiles of these networks demonstrates that they mostly prioritize ecological issues, particularly water management and forestry topics. Notably, operating in regional networks allows civil society to overcome the existing limitations on the activities of NGO’s in some countries in the region, like Laos and Myanmar.