

Euro-Mediterranean Relations: Democratization and the Role of Civil Society

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Many documents, programs and strategies of the European Union highlight the importance of civil society as an element of democracy promotion. In this short article I deal with the question of what civil society actually is and whether the idea of civil society as a motor of democratization is still a valid presumption. Civil society is an often mentioned but essentially contested concept. As the term is characterized by a plurality of different meanings that depend on the historical, cultural and legal context, there is no single, generally accepted concept that defines civil society. It remains rather unclear whether civil society includes any form of non-governmental organization (NGO), such as business people's associations, syndicates or trade unions. Is the media part of civil society or does the concept refer exclusively to NGOs that address specific societal issues? Does the concept only refer to institutionalized and licensed organizations and associations or are social movements, thematic platforms, informal networks and other un-institutionalized formations also part of civil society? After all, they do often fulfill the same functions as civil society organizations (CSOs). And how about religious organizations, are they also part of civil society?

The Normative Conception of Civil Society

Leaving aside non-European experiences, one can roughly distinguish between two dominant European traditions: the Anglo-Saxon and the continental European conceptions of civil society. Whereas in the Anglo-Saxon tradition civil society has been perceived as an independent control institution, a counter-weight or even antidote to the state, in the continental European tradition, civil society is tied to the state through an "associative relationship" (Behr and Siitonen, 2013). In the latter case, civil

society is ideally independent in its operations but in reality often dependent in its survival on public funding.

The 1968 movements in the West and the growing dissident movements against the communist regimes in Eastern Europe revived the idea of civil society as a sphere of civic autonomy, of self-organization and as a vital element of liberal democracy. From the 1970s, civil society came to be seen as a relevant requisite for the demise of authoritarianism and the consolidation of liberal democracy. The concept gained popularity among academics and political activists and came to be "seen as both; an

explanatory variable and as a normative idea” (Behr and Siitonen, 2013). Particularly from the end of the Cold War on, the perception of civil society as a benign force that promotes democracy became prevalent. Many authors, politicians and practitioners idealized the role of civil society in bringing down the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. The longstanding struggle of organizations such as Solidarność in Poland or church-related civic movements in East Germany was seen as proof of the transformational power that can emanate from civil society.

In the emergent post-Cold War liberal era, democracy promotion was seen as a rather technical process. Western democracy promotion mainly built on the implementation of free elections, the reform of state institutions and the assistance of civil society. In many ways, democracy promotion tried to propagate a template, modeled on Western, Anglo-Saxon experiences. One can say that this entailed the universalization of the concept and the meaning of the concept of civil society (Kurki, 2010).

This was also reflected in EU policies on the Eastern and Southern neighborhood. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and later the European Neighbourhood Policy entailed instruments to support civil society in the South and promote networking and exchange with CSOs in the North.

The EU's Flawed Approach to Civil Society in the South

However, the EU's policies in regard to civil society assistance have been flawed since the beginning. The EU's normative conception of civil society has had the effect that only secular “Western style” CSOs could benefit from financial assistance schemes and become part of collaboration networks and programs supporting exchange and dialogue across the

Mediterranean. Most of the southern CSOs that meet the EU's criteria are not grassroots organizations that are situated in remote areas, but are mainly city-based associations, dominated by representatives of the urban elites. In many cases they are well integrated into international networks and can also attract international funding, but they are often detached from the grassroots. “Western style civil society organizations” have also often oriented themselves towards the expectations of international donors, instead of addressing urgent needs and grievances on the ground. In other words, it is mainly those CSOs that are dominated by the representatives of a small globalized elite that does have access to international funding schemes. Many of the small grassroots organizations in remote areas hardly have the human, technical and institutional capacities or knowhow to be able to benefit from the EU programs and instruments.

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Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that authoritarian regimes still prevail in most parts of the southern neighborhood. Authoritarian regimes have often allowed for a limited and controlled radius of operation for CSOs. The admission rules and procedures, the organizational structures and the funding schemes of CSOs are highly dependent on the good will of the authorities. Dependence on the goodwill of the regime has been another factor that has shaped thematic choices and the forms of activism. As most of these organizations have sought good relations with the authorities, politically sensitive areas and issues have been avoided.

Another important factor that has limited CSOs has been the governments' fight against extremism. The war on terrorism has legitimized extraordinary measures that have further limited human rights and democratic liberties. Tunisia and Egypt, although at different scales, are two examples of a growing suspicion about the foreign involvement of local CSOs.

In many places such as Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey, new, restrictive NGO laws have increased government control and often criminalized foreign funding.

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However, it is not only in southern and eastern Mediterranean countries where civil society is under attack. In Europe, civil society has also increasingly faced challenges.

Civil Society in Europe Is Under Attack

Thirty years after the end of the Cold War and the proclamation of a new liberal era in world politics, liberal values and institutions are also under attack in western democracies. Over the last few years, many EU member states have experienced a dramatic rise in illiberal and authoritarian tendencies, while some candidate countries have slid into the grey zone somewhere between authoritarianism and liberal democracy. The rise in illiberal and authoritarian tendencies has not been without its negative effects on civil society. On the one hand, a myriad of right-wing, xenophobic and nationalist CSOs propagating illiberal and anti-

democratic values has emerged; on the other, one can observe that governments are trying to tighten control of CSOs and restrict their activities when their operations conflict with the incumbents' political interests. The latter has been particularly the case with human rights organizations and organizations committed to the support of migrants or the rescue of refugees. CSOs operating in such areas have been put under financial and legal pressure. In many cases this has entailed the criminalization of their activities. Italy and Hungary are two examples of EU member states where the governments have limited the radius of operation of CSOs working with refugees and migrants.

Thus, considering the rise in illiberal and authoritarian tendencies it has become increasingly difficult for CSOs to function and carry out their tasks. Also affected by the repercussions of the financial crisis of 2008, many CSOs in Europe have anyway suffered from financial problems. Fundraising has become increasingly difficult. In contrast to CSOs in the South, organizations in the North barely have access to international funds and funding schemes, usually reserved for developing countries. They are dependent on individual donations, public funding on the national level and EU programs that are usually highly competitive. Therefore, one can say that the room for maneuver of CSOs in Europe has dramatically narrowed.

What Should Be Done?

Considering the fact that the definition of civil society is rather vague, it is important to leave normative assumptions aside and acknowledge that there is a myriad of organizations and movements. Not all of them are a benign force, advancing liberal democracy. While some do have a liberal outlook and might be promoters of liberal democratic values, others pursue illiberal aims. Therefore, it is important to

distinguish between organizations and their ambitions.

The departure from normative assumptions also includes the acknowledgement that civil society can come in different shapes and forms. The trend is that people come together and become active in loose thematic platforms, networks and social movements that are often barely institutionalized. They are not licensed, nor do they have offices or legal representatives. It will certainly be important to develop policies, schemes and instruments on the EU level to address and integrate these rather new potential forces of change. This would also entail the development of a catalogue that establishes more flexible criteria for cooperation and funding for these new forms of civil society.

Another important step would be the establishment of a civil society fund on the EU level. Such a civil society fund would not only emphasize and showcase the EU's

commitment to civil society as a core pillar of democracy but would also help CSOs that are under attack from national (illiberal and populist) governments to escape financial suffocation. Such an EU fund for civil society should make financial assistance conditional on certain democratic goals and criteria and be open to any CSO, platform or network in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

References

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