SUPPORT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AS WINDOW DRESSING. A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF HOW THE EU ENGAGES WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

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The European Union (EU)'s approach to democracy promotion has long been, and to some extent still is, influenced by an institutionalist agenda stemming from the prevailing neoliberal framework under which most Western countries have designed their foreign policies. The Southern Mediterranean is thus perceived as a space in which the EU can inspire and shape the construction of liberal democratic and economic institutions through "value export" diplomacy. The Eurocentric frame rests on the "liberal peace" paradigm, according to which state-building and democracy promotion are only possible through exporting "successful" universally applicable models.

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The launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) opened a new window of opportunity for standardised democratisation in the Southern Mediterranean based on "common values" (i.e., Western liberal values). Ironically, the Southern Mediterranean countries would share with the EU "all but institutions" but have ended up by being encouraged to import or replicate institutional frameworks inspired by European models. In this context, references to civil society have become pervasive in the EU's policy discourses on democracy promotion. Since at least the 1995 Barcelona Declaration, the role of civil society has gained increased recognition by policy-makers in the last three decades and has led to the creation or strengthening of a number of instruments.

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After years of EU neglect, in practice, of civil society actors in the years leading up to it, the 2011 revolts represented a turning point, at least on the rhetorical level. The 2011 ENP Review (European Commission, 2011a) and the Communication A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood (European Commission, 2011b) in the wake of the so-called "Arab Spring" implicitly acknowledged the EU's disconnection with the events on the ground, partly as a consequence of the flaws and contradictions of its approach towards the Southern Mediterranean. The main avowed concern pointed at lack of support and understanding for civil societies, although references were also made to the interest-driven prioritisation of stability and subsequent collusion with authoritarian regimes. The post-2011 period, as evidenced by texts speaking of "partnership with the people" (European Commission, 2011c) and "deep democracy" (European Commission, 2011a), represented a juncture that could have led, at least on paper, to a truly horizontal partnership between EU institutions and civil society.

The EU, however, fell back on a fruitless institutionalist approach on two levels: when developing a strategy for the region in which civil society is factored in, and when devising and implementing programmes with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) as partners. In the first case, the "tick the box" exercise means civil society is considered but not as the central pil-

lar, most of the time not even as a pillar, but instead a necessary element in order for the EU to beautify, and thus legitimise, its strategy(ies). On a micro level, when the EU designs its relationships with civil society, it does so by embracing a "checklist approach" according to which very similar Eurocentric principles and procedures are applied to completely different contexts.

A "Tick the Box" Approach to the Engagement with Civil Society in ENP Strategies

The reproduction – with slight cosmetic changes – of a model deemed successful in other regions forced the EU to accommodate civil society when devising its strategies towards the Southern Mediterranean. The outcomes have been described as incoherent and inconsistent initiatives (Bicchi, 2014) whose transformative impact has remained rather moderate (Kostanyan, 2017).

One chief complication of the "tick the box" approach is that it has no clear conceptual underpinnings, and the ones it has miss the mark. Civil society is perceived on paper as a means to achieve democracy but also as an end in and of itself. Whereas the EU conceptualises civil society, albeit sometimes only at the rhetorical level, as a transformative actor, civil society actors might conceptualise their role differently, for instance in terms of social development, economic welfare or culture (Boiten, 2015). Moreover, the EU's vision is not clearly outlined and hence does not specify either what the inclusion of civil society for a specific country or region means in practical terms or how it leads to the desired outcomes, notably democracy promotion.

The unremitting references to civil society dilute a strategy composed of patchy initiatives through which the EU "sends one message with one voice but pursues conflicting goals" (Börzel & Van Hüllen, 2014). Divergent goals are notably democratisation and stability. As was the case in the past, and given the recent reactions to revolts in countries such as Morocco, Egypt and Algeria, the presumption appears to be that democratisation could lead to instability – the worst of two evils – in the short and medium term. Patchiness has not been ironed out and, post-2011, there has not been an accurate recalibration of relations between North and South. Renovated, sometimes even new, tools have been designed but an old toolbox remains. As a consequence of a deeply incoherent blueprint, objectives and actions cancel each other out. In close association with this insufficiency, new mechanisms are most of the time realistic and attainable only to a certain degree.

In some ways a testimony to its blurry conceptualisation, civil society plays a functional role in making the implementation of EU policies more legitimate, not necessarily more effective. The EU has been accused of caring more about its public relations than about responding to the needs of local civil society (Kausch, 2013) in a continuum with the well-known gap between the EU's rhetoric of civil society empowerment and a practice in which CSOs are not real partners but accessorial constituents. The perception is thus one in which Europe does not genuinely care about what CSOs can achieve but limits itself to funding CSOs in a unilateral "all good things go together" vision (Wetzel & Orbie, 2012).

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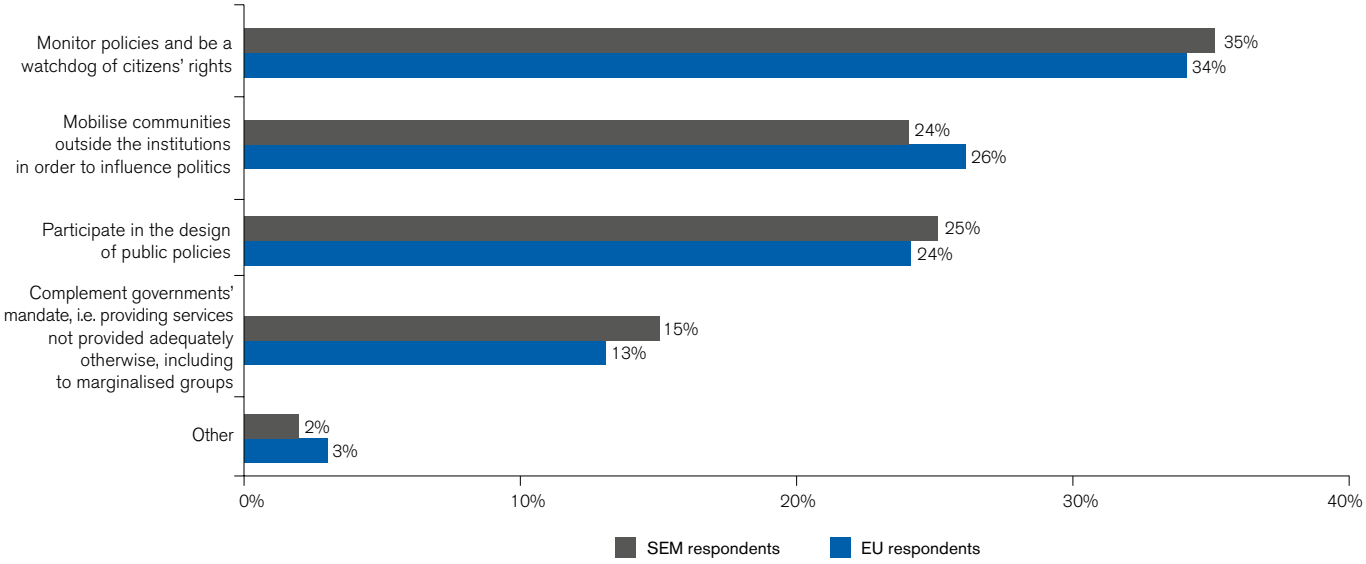
At the practical level, CSOs are constrained to indirect normative promotion and utilised as service delivery agents (Dark, 2018), often complementing the role of state institutions, either within a development agenda or in an agenda based on free-market principles.

Graph 1: What should be the most important mission of civil society?
(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 4)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

Much assistance labelled as democracy promotion focuses on state institutions and not CSOs.

This sheds light on a prioritisation of state-building, sometimes unapologetically so, even if it repeatedly leads to effects contrary to genuine democracy promotion. The focus is on effective rather than democratic governance. Much assistance labelled as democracy promotion focuses on state institutions and not CSOs. State-building efforts conflict with democracy promotion when authoritarian regimes' effective governance is ultimately strengthened.

2011 was a wake-up call for the EU's approach to civil societies in the Southern Mediterranean. Brussels was forced to confront the rejection of an economic and social model inspired by Western institutions (Bergh, 2012). However, state-building efforts through civil society promotion have been – and still are – repeatedly linked to the urgency of advancing economic liberalisation. Hand in hand with the precedence of free market politics, security and stabilisation have been prioritised to boost foreign investors' confidence. Objectives that may be deemed pressing to local needs, such as reinforcing gender equality or strengthening local governance, have been reduced to second-class apprehensions.

Security and stabilisation have been prioritised, while reinforcing gender equality or strengthening local governance have been reduced to second-class apprehensions.

The much-vaunted concept of "principled pragmatism" has ultimately proven to be most of the time tantamount to realpolitik. There is lack of clarity in the strategies concerning the EU's path of action when confronted with incompatible goals vis-à-vis democratisation and partnership with the respective governments. In Algeria, for instance, the EU has provided more capacity-building for the police force than for encouraging civil society projects (Van Hüllen, 2015). Incoherence can also be vertical as a consequence of member states' strategic prioritisation of their interests and perspectives, as has recently been the case in Libya or Egypt. Civil society promotion might be implemented differently depending on the interests at stake and not on the particularities of the respective contexts. The EU-Turkey Statement to end irregular migration flows from Turkey to the EU is an example of prioritisation of both national and European interests and a blatant sidelining of CSOs' concerns.

When it comes to the real issues, the EU ultimately sides with the status quo, seriously hamstringing its normative influence. This inconsistency, as well as the accusations of connivance with authoritarian regimes or figures (Huber and Paciello, 2018), has deepened in the years following the 2011 revolts. The EU has perpetuated a state-centred government-to-government

basis for cooperation. The prospect of building true democratic structures ultimately rests with the regime's willingness to do so, casting light on the gap between EU rhetoric of CSOs' empowerment and their insufficient inclusion in the policy dialogues and processes. Evidence includes the intergovernmental nature of the ENP's Action Plan negotiations or the 2015 ENP reform's suppression of progress reports.

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Consequently, the EU finds itself in a situation in which it publicly and enthusiastically supports CSOs without truly backing up their work when they act as political opposition. Morocco stands as a manifest example. CSOs are thus at best complementary, if and when the respective regime somehow tolerates their stance and work. The financing of civil society actors is also a significant problem, for the state-centred approach also means that civil society projects must be developed within the framework of national law and that the EU has to consult with the partner's regime over which projects to fund. Southern Mediterranean national authorities can also constrain CSOs in terms of bureaucracy as well as by supervising the flows of financial assistance and the registration processes, as evidenced by the dire state of Egyptian civil society.

The above does not mean the EU does not work with CSOs. It does so along safe lines and on "low political issues", such as "climate change", "intercultural dialogue" and "gender equality".

Support for CSOs' lacked teeth from its very inception and still does so after successive much-vaunted reforms. Negative conditionality has been used cautiously. At best, it has been used inconsistently, and not necessarily aimed at democracy promotion. Meaningful support for CSOs in Southern Mediterranean countries is, therefore, limited: neither are they autonomous nor do they have room for manoeuvre to have an impact on an eventual democratisation.

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A "Checklist Approach" to Civil Society Support

"One-size-fits-all" is the mantra of EU democracy promotion also at a secondary level; that is, when the EU designs and implements its strategy towards civil society in every Southern Mediterranean partner. One of the reasons is that aid in the ENP context is instrument- and not demand-driven. Furthermore, funding is oftentimes based on "transition templates" characterised by an indistinct understanding of civil society as a standardised actor and a lack of knowledge of the individual components of every civil society, as we could – and can – see in the projects for the modernisation of the judiciary in Morocco and Tunisia.

Most of the time and despite the post-2011 acknowledgement of the need to engage more broadly with all kinds of civil society, the EU still misreads and simplifies the complexity of local civil societies. The EU ends up by imposing a recognisable notion of civil society, mostly composed of formal elite liberal-minded Western-fashioned individuals and organisations that did not play a key role in spearheading the 2011 revolts or the transition processes. This selective approach works as a "politics of in/visibility" in which many CSOs are either overlooked or straightforwardly sidelined (Burkner & Scott, 2019).

Despite the post-2011 acknowledgement of the need to engage more broadly with all kinds of civil society, there is still a selective approach.

The selective approach is possible because the civil society agenda is primarily determined by the European side. The EU not only selects but also institutionalises and co-opts its partners. Selection, moreover, is not the output of consultative equalitarian processes that could help the EU identify local requirements. Consequently, it is expressed through a highly technical language and articulating a somehow aseptic grammar. Those CSOs more often than not lack sufficient knowledge of local dynamics.

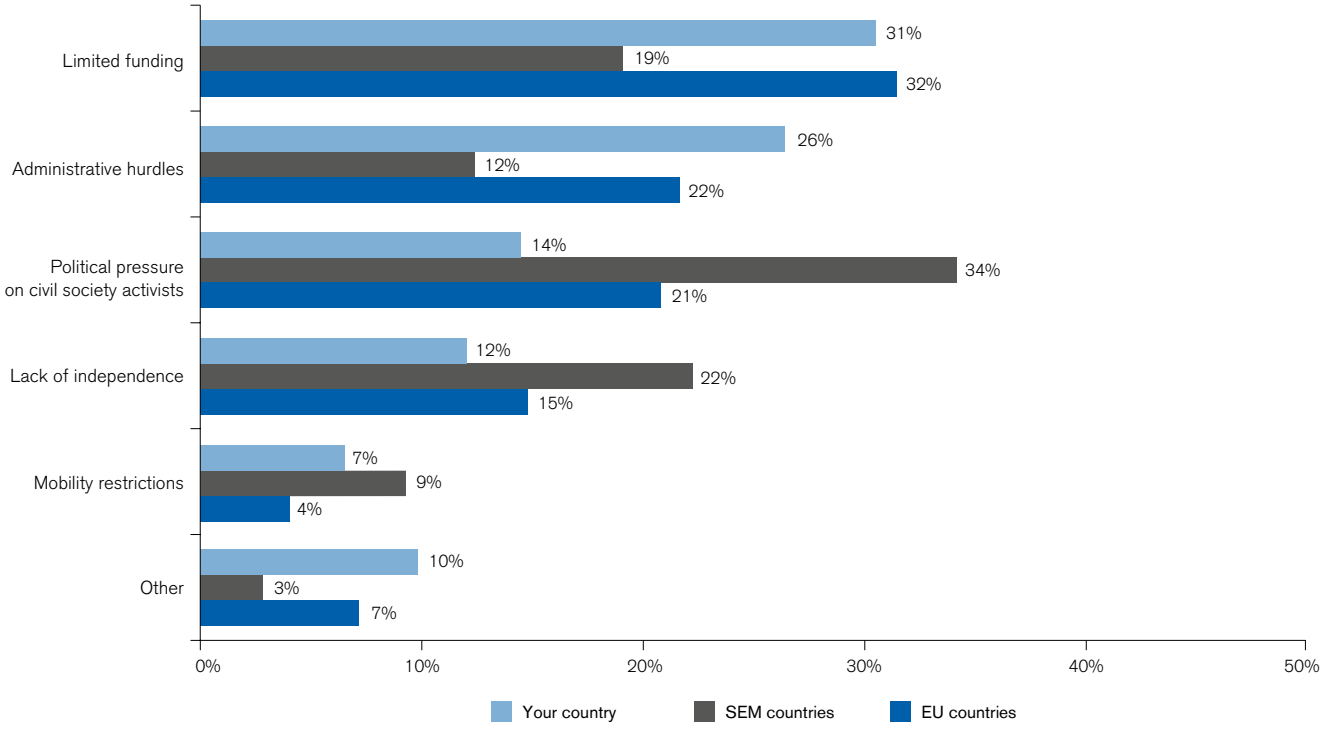
Moreover, the EU discriminates against those actors with whom it deems there is a conflict of values (Nouira & Redissi, 2018), most notably faith-based (namely Islamic) as well as anti-

colonial CSOs. One of the negative consequences of the selective approach is bureaucratisation. Most of the time, it is the EU that sets the programme of meetings, most of them held in French and English. Those conferences frequently overlook agendas that local CSOs consider a priority and avert issues that might be considered too politicised or potentially detrimental to multilateral and bilateral relations with Southern Mediterranean regimes. Bureaucratisation goes hand in hand with sometimes labyrinthine registration schemes, funding procedures and terms of evaluation that barely allow for any margin of manoeuvre for the consolidation of new and small initiatives (Cebeci, 2019). The approach seems to forget it was not mainstream formally established and non-conventional CSOs that had a leading role in the 2011 uprisings.

The EU tends to privilege organisations that cannot be categorically considered grassroots groups but consolidated entities that have spent years specialising in the process of building relationships with Western donors.

The EU's institutionalist approach can furthermore deny countless CSOs much needed agency. CSOs might thus be prevented from being autonomous, both because they are not able to generate enough funding if the respective regime does not tolerate so, and because they are not able to get resources if they do not adapt to a Eurocentric mould. Some CSOs see themselves forced to accommodate European terms and frameworks in an instrumental fashion.

Graph 2: What are the obstacles for establishing a successfully working civil society?
(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 4)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

In its devising and implementing of civil society strategies in the Southern Mediterranean, one of the consequences has been the direct and indirect strengthening of authoritarian tendencies. A state-centric approach leads to favouring those CSOs that have been co-opted, or at least intimidated, by Southern Mediterranean regimes, ultimately supporting CSOs – the case of Algeria comes to mind – that will probably never become agents of transformative change. So-called "NGO-cracies" are not only close to the regime's views and channel most EU's funding (Catalano & Graciano, 2016) but are also consequently disconnected from the debates within grassroots organisations.

Moving Forward

The EU's "checklist approach" when it comes to its relationship with civil societies on different levels erodes the Union's credibility, worryingly restraining its potential in supporting democracy promotion, social development and sustainability in the Southern Mediterranean. One necessary, but almost unimaginable, goal would be to bolster a change of paradigm towards moving away from normative Eurocentric approaches and embracing the idea of true equality and co-ownership between partners, not just regimes but civil societies as well. That mindset would need to take into consideration similar and interrelated transnational dynamics and challenges, shared by North and South in a globalised context, as an opportunity and not a threat.

Focusing on more realistic "problem-solving" approaches does not consent the EU to waive the need to reflect on profound changes but could, in the short term, aim at achieving higher levels of coherence and effectiveness. In this regard, the goal would be to cease confusing democratisation with Europeanisation (Gunay, 2015), to put forward a comprehensive, comprehensible, consistent strategy and thus to put an end to the confusion on concepts, policies, objectives and mechanisms.

Civil societies should be systematically included – and consulted – in any ENP negotiation.

Recent events have shown that the kind of stability preached by authoritarian leaders is not sustainable in the long run, an excellent reason to go beyond securitised approaches and false democratisation-stabilisation dilemmas and look for ways of promoting a combination of genuinely democratic and effective governance. If the option appears unattainable, or unpalatable, in the short term, the cautious stance would be advancing more realistic – even if less pompous – grassroots projects and initiatives, and thus less ambitious, carefully crafted goals. Use of negative conditionality in the framework of the partnership agreements should be critical.

Civil societies should be systematically included – and consulted – in any ENP negotiation. Southern Mediterranean CSOs' stance must be taken into account when devising future blueprints of partnerships with their respective countries. In that regard, the EU needs to make sure there is an effectively autonomous civil society (chiefly from a financial point of view, even if that implies risk-taking). Inclusiveness will, however, go beyond well-intentioned but ultimately cosmetic (and even so exceptional) gestures, such as the establishment of the Tunisian "tripartite dialogue" aimed at discussing the negotiations of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (Dandashly, 2018).

The EU needs to find a way to systematically differentiate its "one-size-fits-all" approach and put the ENP's focus on reflecting more closely the specificities of each Southern Mediterranean society, actors and needs.

Disregard for local conditions is both a cause and a consequence of a deeply institutionalist approach. The EU needs to find a way to systematically differentiate its "one-size-fits-all" approach and put the ENP's focus on reflecting more closely the specificities of each Southern Mediterranean society, actors and needs. This calls for broadening the concept of civil society striving to eschew cultural relativism and questions around civilisational narratives. In that regard, facilitating access to the respective registration, funding, participation and consultation procedures to a wide array of CSOs and other actors is an utterly strategic step. The chief requisite should be their meeting local, not necessarily democratisation-related, demands. Last but not least, factoring in gender and other intersecting factors should be a transversal need in all contexts, levels and stages.

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