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No party, no society: the EU's and the US's differing approaches to providing international aid to political parties

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Published online: 8 December 2015
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Abstract While both the EU and the US consider support for civil society an inseparable part of international democracy support schemes, they differ in their understanding of who the key partners for transformation are. US aid to support democratic change in societies includes providing assistance to non-governmental organisations, political parties, trade unions and businesses. In contrast, the EU restricts access to its support primarily to the non-political part of the civil society spectrum. Including political parties and political non-governmental organisations among EU aid recipients would be a quantum leap on the way to a stronger and more comprehensive transition to democracy. This article lays down arguments to support this proposal, draws on ideas from the US experience and outlines basic schemes for its implementation.

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Keywords Democracy | International aid | Civil society | Support for political parties

Introduction

While both the EU and the US consider support for civil society¹ an inseparable part of international democracy support schemes, they differ in their understanding of who the key partners for transformation are. US aid in support of democratic change includes assistance for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), political parties, trade unions and businesses. In contrast, the EU restricts access to its support primarily to the non-political part of the civil society spectrum, mainly the NGOs. This article outlines why a more holistic EU approach to civil society support schemes would be welcomed. With the transition experience accumulated by those member states that have more recently joined the EU and the vast network of non-EU political parties with strong ties to EU party networks, the EU is in a much better position than the US to provide more complex aid to the political part of the civil society in its neighbourhood.² By accelerating the use of these two potential strengths, EU aid could become more comprehensive and better targeted. Furthermore, support from the EU and US aid would complement each other, which would make international aid more coherent, especially in those countries with historical and geopolitical ties to the EU.

US democracy support

The turning point for US aid was the US Congress's response in 1983 to Ronald Reagan's 'Westminster speech' (Reagan 2002), which called for support for aspiring democrats worldwide. Consequently, the Congress established a new structure for US aid—the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). This led to the creation of a whole network of organisations that support the pro-democratic efforts of the entire range of civil societies, including NGOs, political parties, businesses and trade unions.

The allocation of US aid to political parties is mainly carried out by two organisations, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI). Both receive most of their funding from the NED, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the US State Department. The two institutes work on five continents and in more than one hundred countries with political parties, governments, parliaments and NGOs to establish and strengthen democratic institutions and practices. They use both country-based programmes and a multinational approach that reinforces the message that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies. Through this network, the US was ready to provide immediate support to aspiring democracies in Central and Eastern Europe after

¹ In this article the term 'civil society' is construed broadly so as to include non-governmental organisations, i.e. all organisations and associations that exist outside of the state, political parties, business organisations, churches, trade unions and various interest groups. See Carothers (1999).

² For the purpose of this paper, the term 'EU neighbourhood' is taken to refer to the EU's immediate neighbours, including the Western Balkans and the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. The US invested in building civil societies by providing civic education and training, foreign expert assistance, peer support, and grant-giving schemes for organisations and various grass-roots initiatives and projects, including providing assistance to political parties. The latter was done in close cooperation with the German political foundations, which had already extended their programmes abroad in the late 1970s and 1980s, then mainly to Latin America and Southern Europe.

The development of EU democracy support

The EU, until then an inward-looking common market-based union, reacted relatively promptly after the fall of the Iron Curtain by developing its first aid schemes. Taking the form of budgetary support and technical assistance to help build state institutions and public administrations or to provide support for legal approximation, this state-centred aid was a counterpart to the US programmes.

Since then EU international aid has moved from purely government-centred support to providing more inclusive assistance, including civil society in its focus. This was a very positive development, as civil society is equally important in bringing about change, but more needs to be done to complete this paradigm shift (Lexmann 2013). The EU must move away from budgetary support and invest a greater proportion of the overall country-based aid budget in civil society, including political parties and organisations. A more holistic approach to democracy support would not only better serve the EU's aspirations in the target regions, but would meet the desires and development needs of the whole spectrum of civil society, from the NGOs and political party structures to the business sector. The first sign of a more differentiated EU approach was the establishment of the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights in 2000, which in 2006 became the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). By bringing human rights and civil society into the centre of the changes, the establishment of this instrument indicated a significant shift in the direction of EU support for democracy. However, in comparison with the support for human rights, democracy support in this programme still remains of somewhat secondary importance (Bogdanova et al. 2010; Rihackova 2010). Subsequently, the EU has developed a whole panoply of programmes and tools to support participatory and representative democracy worldwide. Additionally to the EIDHR, democracy support is also provided through various thematic and regional programmes, such as the Development Cooperation Instrument and the European Neighbourhood Instrument, which came into force in 2014. The candidate countries of the Western Balkans also enjoy the support of the Civil Society Facility programme of the Instrument for Pre-Accession.

Including political parties and political NGOs among the EU's partners would be a quantum leap on the way to a stronger and more comprehensive transition to democracy. It would also improve the balance and create bridges among the various civil society interest groups and sub-groups, as well as between these groups and the policymaking, governmental institutions and the legislation drafting process. The EU's favourable approach to NGOs strengthens the mental divide between the two as NGOs

are seen as pro-democratic while political parties are perceived as laggards from the past. Investing in one part of society inevitably weakens the other and thus only a balanced approach can trigger an overall change in political culture and lead to genuine democratic transition.

Removing the stigma from party support

One external reason for the reluctance to approach political parties when providing democracy support may well be the general decline in interest in political parties that has led to a dramatic drop in party membership in the donor countries (Van Biezen et al. 2012). Aside from general apathy, the legacy of previous government-centred aid, that recognises government as the centre of change, and the narrow understanding of civil society shared by EU decision-makers, as mentioned above, may also contribute to this reluctance.

Experience of democratic transitions tells us that political parties can either lead democratic change or be the main obstacle to it. Well-tailored assistance in the programmatic, managerial and ideological spheres of work, or support in transforming electoral success into responsible and efficient governance certainly supports the former scenario rather than the latter.

Providing assistance to political parties means neither the narrow support needed to ensure ‘free and fair elections’ nor financial intervention in the political arena. It involves supporting democratic checks and balances within policymaking systems, encouraging strong party management and the participatory approach, and creating a space for dialogue with the rest of civil society. The latter is of particular importance as in many recipient countries civil society is highly polarised and the relationship between political parties and NGOs can be rather toxic (ENoP 2014). While local NGOs consider political parties to be volatile alliances that struggle for power and state resources, political parties do not regard NGOs as representative of society as they are perceived as donor-driven and fully dependent on international funding. The current imbalance in EU funding only enhances this gap, which often results in restrictive laws being imposed on NGOs by political parties via their respective parliaments. But as long as political leaders are elected predominantly via political parties, the only answer to these challenges is to provide well-targeted aid that creatively invests in individuals, provides a breeding space for the creation of pro-reform cross-party coalitions and looks for partners in order to assert pressure when needed. The inclusion of all political parties that uphold democratic values is also indispensable to ensuring true progress is made. In addition, the NGO–political party relationship should be of particularly high importance as it is central to a functioning democracy. NGOs should be encouraged to seek communication with pro-reform parties or representatives and, vice versa, political parties need to be more responsive to the needs of NGOs. This would not only improve party policies and engage citizens in the democratic process, but would enrich the variety of policy options for voters by bringing disenfranchised and underrepresented parts of the population into the political discourse, thus contributing to the birth of a free and responsible citizenry. In the long run, greater engagement between civil society and political

parties would strengthen the roles of both sides in the democratic transition. It would also encourage the development of internal democratic procedures within the two sectors, help NGOs to become more representative and increase citizens' confidence in parties, as they would become more accountable to their electorate (ENoP 2015).

Equally, efficient support must address not only individual parties but also imbalances in the political and party systems, gaps in constitutional frameworks, politicised and non-transparent election systems, and restrictive legislation. Weak systems can hinder political parties from fulfilling their role or have a completely inhibiting effect on them, and vice versa. To strengthen political parties individually and as a system, support is often divided into two principal spheres of work: first, multi-partisan assistance, with a focus on party systems, parliamentary procedures and electoral cycles; and second, assistance centred around the development of individual parties or party coalitions. While the EU slowly starts to act in a very limited way solely within the former, the EU member states' political foundations and the US aid organisations are acting within both. It is important to mention that even support to individual parties is impartial from a general perspective as both donors and implementers make sure that all parties that are sharing democratic values are recipients of such support within their ideological context.

Finally, the EU government-centred support that still prevails creates another cleavage in the transforming society. This not only stems from an incorrect premise that the transforming society can be considered to be moving towards democracy (Carothers 2002), but also implicitly exclusively supports the governmental political parties and their networks, for example by providing human capital and expertise. This approach leaves the opposition parties as the only part of the triangle of NGOs, political parties and government that is completely excluded from EU support. This is especially true in highly politicised governmental structures. Yet it is the opposition that has the potential to execute a thorough scrutiny of the government, despite having the least access to various opportunities to be trained and receive expert support. However, governmental political parties do also need targeted support, as their structures become exhausted while in government and they often end up as victims of their own success. This is particularly disappointing if the party was the leading pro-reform partner.

Thus the cleavage between the parties and NGOs, the shortcomings in the framework of party systems versus individual parties, and the breach between government and opposition must all be addressed with a thorough understanding of the political, institutional, historical, geographical and cultural context and, in practical terms, with good coordination among the various donors and implementers.

Party support in praxis

Apart from training, seminars, round tables and direct expertise, one of the most sophisticated tools for party support is polling. While other instruments focus on capacity building and enhancing expertise, polling builds bridges between political parties and society as a whole and provides a reality check. However, it is one of the most costly

methods of support. Moreover, in countries that have not yet embarked on a democratic path, polling may create extensive security issues. Today polling is used predominantly by US organisations. It provides clear information about the trends in a given society and helps political parties and their institutes to set better-targeted political and communication strategies. Furthermore, it helps international communities, donors and implementers to come up with better fitting and more efficient aid instruments. Without claiming to be the only decisive factor, polling contributed to the setting-up of successful campaigns by the pro-democratic opposition against former Prime Minister Mečiar in Slovakia in 1998. It also helped to identify the strongest candidate—former President and Prime Minister Koštunica—to run against the former Serbian President Slobodan Milošević and to unify the Democratic Opposition of Serbia’s coalition in the 2000 Serbian general elections. Polling is currently being used regularly in Tunisia, the only relatively successful story of the Arab Spring, where it was instrumental for all democratic parties in preparing for the parliamentary and presidential elections in autumn 2014 and is being used in support of the reform processes. In Ukraine, polling is crucial, not only for the current Ukrainian political leadership, but also for the vital pro-reform civil society and all the international players providing support to the country.

One of the biggest challenges to the popularity of the political part of democracy support programmes among donors concerns evaluation and monitoring, as it is very difficult to measure clear outcomes and success. Long-term investment into a small, but healthy political party or coalition of parties, operating in a political system under repression, might eventually, after a couple of election cycles, result in a major accomplishment and subsequently bring about the successful reform of an unhealthy state. But the feeling of doing the right thing sometimes has to prevail for several years despite interim negative results. It must also beat off competing projects which would bring immediate results though on a much smaller scale. Such investments therefore require a strong political and strategic approach based on qualitative measures, rather than on technical quantities. Unfortunately, the latter more closely reflects the current technical nature of EU aid.

In unstable political systems where the direction of political parties changes relatively quickly and they often operate in situations of oppression or very disparate environments, it is of utmost importance that a close working relationship is built up with all the relevant parties that at least to some extent adhere to democratic values. This must be the case both in situations of oppression and in situations where the fragmented opposition unintentionally serves as one of the strongholds of those ‘in power’. It is also necessary when the ruling party is considered a bringer of change, as it could easily become an obstacle to change, thus hindering the pro-democratic potential.

Strengths and weaknesses on both sides of the Atlantic

Even after the major restructuring of the EU programmes that has taken place recently in order to make them more flexible, those implementing the aid provided by the US

government or the NED still enjoy relatively greater flexibility than their EU counterparts. This lack of adaptability creates a considerable challenge for the implementers of EU aid, especially when operating in countries with repressive regimes and restrictions on any political or civil society activism. The flexibility challenge was one of the drivers behind the establishment of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) in 2012. The NED served as the model for this new EU democracy assistance provider. The EED does not enjoy the status of an EU institution; nevertheless the EU member states and institutions provide the funding for it and oversee its operation.

Besides flexibility, another requirement of effective democracy support is sustainability. The lack of sustainability has caused some US-funded country programmes to be withdrawn too soon. As a result some countries in the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus have ended up in deep political crises without stable party programmes or programmes of a sufficient size.³ Notwithstanding these examples, in general US support has a rather higher sustainability capacity than that of the EU, as within certain aid schemes, such as the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS),⁴ funding can be extended to avoid disruptions if need be. In contrast, the average life cycle of an EU project is about three years and, in general, funding cannot be extended.

As stated above, EU instruments and tools are designed to act, if at all, only in the scope of multilateral support for political parties, and projects undertaken so far have been limited to general elections or parliamentary work. However, the EU is taking small steps in order to bridge the gaps in its democracy support. In two consecutive projects, it has supported the European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP).⁵ Although it did not provide funding for its support programmes, the financial assistance offered contributed to greater coordination among the different political foundations and thus increased the efficiency of their programmes in general and of the smaller foundations in particular. The outreach activities of the platform have also increased the visibility and presence of political organisations in the European discourse on how to best support democracy aspirations worldwide. Furthermore, the European Commission produced a guideline, 'Strengthening democracy support to EU delegations: from performance

³ For example, in Moldova, US-funded political party programmes were withdrawn before the solidification of the Communist Party's power before the 2001 elections, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina both the IRI and NDI closed their offices in 2008 before reopening them in 2010. A similar situation existed in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and it is still not receiving sufficient funds, despite the very complex political situation there. We can observe similar scenarios now, as the US's work with political parties is being weakened in many parts of the world, including Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the unceasing need for support.

⁴ CEPPS is a cooperative agreement signed in 1995 and supervised by the USAID Office of Democracy and Governance. As part of USAID's Acceleration Success initiative, the agreement is the principal contractor for the Office of Democracy and Government's elections and political processes programme, which provides technical assistance and support to USAID missions worldwide. The agreement includes the IRI, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems and the NDI.

⁵ The ENoP is a representative platform of 70 political foundations from 25 countries. It unites member foundations from six party families: the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, the European People's Party (EPP), the Socialists and Democrats, the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists, the Greens/European Free Alliance and the European United Left/Nordic Green Left.

indicators, knowledge sharing to expert services’ (European Commission 2012), to help EU officials and delegations to run programmes that are aimed at political parties. And finally and most importantly, the European Commission has included stepping up EU engagement with political parties in its recent Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2015–2019) ‘Keeping human rights at the heart of the EU agenda’ (European Commission 2015, 9).

In this context the recent restructuring of the former European Parliament (EP) Office for Promotion of Parliamentary Democracy into the Directorate for Democracy Support is also relevant. Unlike the Office for Promotion of Parliamentary Democracy, the new Directorate does not choose its target countries randomly or based on unclear criteria or ‘exotic features’, but rather has opted to invest in countries with the highest potential to achieve—thus the European neighbourhood in particular, with Ukraine as the top priority.

Ukraine in the spotlight

In order to illustrate the support given to political parties by various actors in a concrete example, we should take a closer look at Ukraine. The success of this country in terms of democratic transition is of utmost importance, not only for the people of Ukraine but for the whole of Europe. Out of a total of just 50 projects related to political parties that were conducted by the EU worldwide between 2007 and 2013, only 1 was conducted in Ukraine. It was a project under the EIDHR that supported minority voices in the 2012 parliamentary elections, and had a budget of €46,000 (EuropeAid 2014). That means that no attention was paid to the then opposition political parties during the reign of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. And yet the onus of running the country, war-torn and with sky-high corruption, today rests mainly on their shoulders. Of course, one could argue that the political parties are part of the problem, but that could have been less the case if greater attention had been paid to them before they took the wheel after the Maidan protests. Moreover, working with political parties while they are in opposition is often easier. Governmental responsibilities exhaust party structures and parties in government are exposed to greater challenges internally and externally and are overwhelmed by the day-to-day workload.

The core portion of the US government’s funding for Ukraine’s political parties and structures is channelled through CEPPS and since 2009 has totalled roughly \$19.5 million.⁶ The implementers of the assistance consist of the IRI, the NDI and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. This funding covers support for political parties; multilateral party programmes, such as work with the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada and election focused programmes; and support for NGOs. It is hard to separate the funding that has been spent solely on providing party support, as many programmes overlap and work with both NGOs and political parties. However, the IRI share of roughly \$7

⁶ These data have been provided by the CEPPS secretariat to the author.

million was primarily invested into party support, as its programmes with NGOs are relatively few. About \$600,000 of the overall budget was spent by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems on election support programmes. These figures include overheads and office costs in addition to funding spent in the field. Nevertheless, the numbers show that the US's investment into political party capacity building in Ukraine has been considerably higher than that of the EU. Unfortunately, US funding was not increased in proportion to the need and momentum brought about by the events on the Maidan. For example, the IRI was only able to provide training for the more than one thousand candidates in the recent regional elections (October 2015) due to a multi-million dollar grant from the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development that runs until 2017. US funding has not increased, both due to its decreasing flexibility and responsiveness, as well as due to the relatively lower level of priority given to democracy support by the current US administration.

To complete the picture for Ukraine, another actor that provides party support is the EED, which has supported programmes aimed at the institutional and organisational growth of two political parties. This support, totalling approximately €190,000, was provided via party-related institutes (EED [n.d.](#)).

Among the German foundations, it is mainly the Konrad Adenauer Foundation that works with political parties and its work is built around three main aspects: capacity building, EU integration, and lessons learned from and reconciliation with the Communist past. The Foundation's annual programme includes around 20 events for political leaders and party members. In its 20-year-long history in Ukraine the Foundation has invested in several tens of thousands of political leaders on the national, regional and local levels. It has also improved the relationship between political parties and NGOs. The other German foundations focus on NGOs, local and regional authorities, and building bridges between the political parties.

The EP has recently launched a needs assessment of the Ukrainian parliament, which will lead to the publication of a 'Report and roadmap on internal reform and capacity building for the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine' (EP [2015](#)). The process is being led by the Directorate for Democracy Support and involves a large number of organisations, institutes and experts, some of which have been hired by the EP. The report will provide the basis for subsequent tailor-made training and support measures provided by the staff and Members of the EP. The participation of Members of the EP is a very positive change but the EP or the European Commission should also try to see ways to involve reform leaders from the EU member states.

This is already very successfully being done by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, which has launched a pilot project that takes reform leaders from Central and Eastern Europe to Ukraine to provide support for its pro-reform processes. The Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (AECR) has also recently opened a small office in Kyiv and provides consultancy and training for pro-reform political parties in Ukraine. However, the current funding structures do not allow European political

foundations to fully explore their potential to support democratic transition outside of the EU.

Conclusion

Recognising civil society as an important player in supporting democracy has changed the way the EU engages with countries outside its borders. To make this strategic change complete and thus successful, the stigma surrounding the support of political parties has to be removed and fully fledged party support programmes need to be placed on an equal footing with support for the rest of civil society. This support can be built on three pillars: first, by seizing the potential for European political parties to provide assistance to their partners in the EU's neighbourhood either directly or via their institutes; second, by seeking new ways to support the extraordinary work being done by political foundations, most of which are united in the ENoP; and third, by enabling greater sharing of transition experiences.

Without doubt, one of the greatest potentials of the EU as a donor lies in the transition experiences of its Central and Eastern European member states. Nevertheless, the commitment to utilise this potential remains mainly on the pages of numerous EU papers. Between 2007 and 2010 only 3.6 % (Szent-Iványi 2014) of the total value of all grants and contracts aimed at promoting democracy among the Eastern neighbours was used for projects in which Central and Eastern European organisations were the lead partners. That equates to just 30 projects out of 649. The EU must not only increase the participation of institutions from the more recent member states as implementers of its programmes, but also seek ways to pass on the enormous transition and reform knowledge shared by Central and Eastern European political and party leaders, especially in its neighbourhood. The European party foundations are in the best place to provide the space and structure for such an exchange with the vast networks of political parties in the EU's neighbourhood.⁷ The transition experience, combined with the considerable expertise of the parties from old democracies, could translate into a great leap forward in reform processes and legal approximation, as well as in the overall transformation of the political cultures of the parties themselves, thus bringing conversion and change to the societies of neighbouring candidate and associated countries. This potential is clearly demonstrated by the few existing initiatives of this kind, such as the above-mentioned pilot projects of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and the AECR. However, the current funding structures do not allow the European political parties and foundations to fully explore their potential in this sense.

⁷ The EPP has as many as 20 associate parties in the countries of Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and the Western Balkans. Furthermore, at its last Congress (October 2015) the EPP opened up a new membership status—"Partner Member"—for political parties from the Middle East and North Africa region. Many of these parties are in government. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe has about a dozen associate members, the Party of European Socialists has around seven and the AECR also has a few.

Equally, the EU should extend its funding for both the multilateral and one-party targeted support that is currently provided by a strong network of implementers, including the political foundations, the international organisations with a focus on elections and political processes, the European political foundations, the EED and the EP, and perhaps also engage with national parliaments' programmes to support parliamentary democracy. In addition, it should invest more in increasing expertise on working with political parties and parliaments among the EU staff in Brussels as well as at the EU delegations worldwide.

In this respect, it is important that the implementers of political party support do not view their involvement as competing with NGOs for their share of the civil society pie. A more diversified allocation of funds, with clear budgetary lines for support of the political aspect of civil society may be required. Moreover (1) flexibility, (2) sustainability, and (3) a less technical and more political approach must be among the main principles of the support schemes. One way to embrace these principles, and at the same time to accelerate the transition-sharing potential of small political foundations in Central and Eastern Europe, would be for the EU to consider using a sub-granting scheme awarded to a broad consortium of political foundations, similar to the one currently being debated with the European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development in the area of EU funding for development education and awareness raising. This could represent a huge step towards more political, flexible and responsive funding of EU development and democracy support.

Moreover, the EU's support for election processes and election observation missions should take into account the full electoral cycle and not only focus on ad hoc electoral support. It should place special emphasis on the role of running or elected representatives, political parties and institutions, national and local legislators, independent media and civil society organisations in this respect.

Economic and geopolitical arguments and reasons for 'democracy enlargement fatigue' may be put forward. The main principles of democracy support can equally be used to justify disengagement, such as the argument that 'democracy cannot be exported, but has to come from within the societies', or that there are many forms of democracy and we cannot come up with a 'one size fits all' solution. However, neither of the above excuses sets countries that enjoy democracy free from the responsibility of supporting the desire for freedom inherent in every human being. And thus seeking efficient and innovative ways of helping people to enjoy and 'to live' their freedom must be the main aim of any effective foreign aid and a moral prerogative.

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