



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Communist and Post-Communist Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud

Mapping the substance of the EU's civil society support in Central Asia: From neo-liberal to state-led civil society

Vera Axyonova ^{a, *}, Fabienne Bossuyt ^b

^a Institute of Political Science, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Germany

^b Department of Political Science, Ghent University, Belgium

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Central Asia
Civil society
European Union
External assistance
Citizen participation

ABSTRACT

Over the years, civil society empowerment has become an integral part of the European Union's (EU) external and internal governance as a way to advance democracy and enhance citizen participation. While there has been increasing scholarly attention to the instruments and impact of the EU's civil society support, so far there has been little research on the question what kind of civil society the EU actually promotes. This article intends to fill this gap by examining the substance of the EU's civil society support in post-Soviet Central Asia, a region where various forms of civil society organizations (CSOs) exist. The findings reveal a differentiation between civil society types promoted in EU strategic documents and those that are supported in practice. While at the strategic planning level the EU seeks to strengthen civil society broadly construed, at the program implementation level the (neo-) liberal CSOs are the main beneficiaries. At the same time, the EU customizes its civil society assistance depending on the realities on the ground and at times finds itself empowering state-led civil society, while communal groups rarely benefit from the EU assistance schemes. This has severe implications for the advancement of citizen participation, considering that the actual grass-root initiatives are largely excluded from the EU assistance.

© 2016 Published by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of The Regents of the University of California.

1. Introduction

Over the years, civil society support has become an integral part of the European Union (EU)'s democracy and human rights promotion policy (Balfour, 2006: 118; Youngs, 2001a,b). The EU's democracy promotion strategy considers a pluralist and independent civil society as a crucial aspect of democracy building and human rights awareness building (Balfour, 2006: 118). The profile of EU democracy assistance funding confirms this claim, with civil society support receiving a considerable share of the resources, oriented particularly to human rights NGOs (Balfour, 2006: 118; Youngs, 2001a: 362; Youngs, 2001b: 192). At the same time, the EU also views civil society organizations (CSOs) as development actors capable of representing and defending vulnerable and socially excluded groups (European Commission, 2012: 3) and sees their participation as a key factor in designing policies that meet people's needs (European Commission, 2012: 6). It supports CSO work with the view to achieve inclusive and sustainable development. This dual understanding of civil society as fulfilling both a democratization and a development function is central to the European Commission's latest policy document on civil society support to third

* Corresponding author.

countries¹ “The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe's Engagement with Civil Society in External Relations”. The document states that the emphasis of the EU's policy is on “CSOs' engagement to build stronger democratic processes and accountability systems and to achieve better development outcomes” (European Commission, 2012: 4).

The EU's support to CSOs as development and democratization agents is rooted in the pluralist understanding of civil society as: “citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, preferences, and ideas, to exchange information, to achieve collective goals, to make demands on the state, to improve the structure and functioning of the state, and to hold state officials accountable” (Diamond, 1999: 221). Hereby, CSOs are regarded as a form of citizen participation, that is, citizens' involvement at different levels (from commune to region and nation), which is able to affect both the process of political decision-making and the citizens' immediate social environment (Bliss and Neumann, 2008: 14).

While there has been increasing scholarly attention to the instruments and impact of the EU's civil society assistance, so far there has been little or no research on the question what kind of civil society the EU actually promotes, especially in regions that are not part of the EU's neighbourhood. Answering this question could further contribute to understanding the EU's policies towards civil society and to conceptualizing the EU as an external provider of democracy and development aid. In addition, an examination of the substance of the EU's civil society support could help to shed light on the impact of the EU's assistance on the processes of citizen participation in countries beyond Europe. This article undertakes such an examination based on a case study of the EU's civil society support in post-communist Central Asia,² a region where the EU has been increasing its engagement since the early 2000s and where various forms of civil society mobilization have (re-)emerged since the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Central Asia stands out as a region where all five countries are non-democratic. However, there is a noticeable variation of authoritarianism across the region. Kyrgyzstan is politically (and economically) the most liberalized and ranges between ‘soft authoritarianism’ and ‘anarchic regional oligarchy’ (Ziegler, 2015: 10). The country had moments of political liberalization coupled with popular uprisings linked to attempts by Presidents Askar Akaev (1991–2005) and Kurmanbek Bakiev (2005–2010) to impose stronger presidential rule (Bossuyt and Kubicek, 2011: 645). At the other end of the spectrum are Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, whose regimes rank as dictatorial and extremely repressive. The political regimes in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan tend to be a bit ‘softer’, at times relying more on co-optation than outright coercion. Kazakhstan can be described as ‘orderly soft authoritarian’, while Tajikistan is ‘moderately authoritarian with chaotic elements’ (Ziegler, 2015: 10). Like their Soviet predecessors, Central Asia's authoritarian leaders tend to consider all forms of societal organization as a potential threat to their political rule. Only if they can control non-state actors' activities and restrict these to non-political service provision can they tolerate the idea of civil society and allow space for their activities (Ziegler, 2015: 9). Of course, in line with the varying degrees of authoritarianism in Central Asia, the level of mistrust towards civil society organizations is less pronounced in the more liberalized countries of the region than in the strongly autocratic countries.

While civil society in Central Asia is generally considered to be weak, partly due to the strong legacy of Soviet totalitarianism (Bossuyt and Kubicek, 2011; Ziegler, 2015), today's civil society landscape in Central Asia is quite diverse. There are various forms of CSOs that do not necessarily resemble non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that exist in Western democracies. Many public associations, such as cooperatives, youth and professional organizations and trade unions, were inherited from the Soviet times. Partly reorganized, these associations often maintain their earlier logic of functioning, are co-financed by the state and serve as an extension of government structures (Giffen et al., 2005: 70–82). Another form of civil society groups that re-emerged in Central Asia in the 1990s were local community-based initiatives and self-help groups that draw on the centuries-long tradition of community self-help termed *hashar/ashar*, important especially in rural areas. These groups are often based on informal mechanisms (kinship, friendship, neighbourliness) to offer services, community infrastructure and other essentials (Babajanian et al., 2005: 217). Most of these organizations consider their relationship with the state as collaborative rather than confrontational (Ziegler, 2015: 15). At the same time, a large number of what Babajanian et al. (2005) term ‘neo-liberal’ non-governmental organizations were established in the region in the 1990s. Their emergence and development were strongly promoted through massive foreign donor programs often with political agendas, which made NGOs subject to criticism as artificial and alien to the region. The number of neo-liberal NGOs considerably decreased in the 2000s, when their activities were constrained by the governments and Western funding started fading away (Buxton, 2009: 44–45; Giffen et al., 2005: 83–90). Finally, cross-border civil society initiatives are also present in Central Asia, although to a considerably lesser extent. Similarly to neo-liberal NGOs, cross-border networks are not inherent with the region. Rather, a few campaigns started by international donors or transnational NGOs as part of global initiatives targeted the region and initiated cross-border networks active in several Central Asian countries (Buxton, 2009).

In examining the substance of the EU's civil society support in Central Asia, the article explores whether the EU uses a (pre-determined) template of civil society, and thus follows a sort of one-size-fits-all approach, or whether it promotes different types of CSOs depending on the domestic context in the countries concerned and thus follows a more flexible approach. To distinguish different kinds of civil society advanced by international actors in Central Asia, we follow the typology suggested by Babajanian et al. (2005), who identify four types of civil society promoted in the broader Eurasian region: neo-liberal, communal, state-led and global civil society.³

¹ The term ‘third countries’ or ‘third states’ refers in this article to non-EU and non-applicant countries.

² The region comprises five post-Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

³ For more information see Section 2.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5114285>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5114285>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)