INDEPENDENT ACTORS IN DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

EU support for political parties – why does it matter and how can it be enhanced?

A Discussion Paper from the European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP)

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1. Executive Summary

Political parties are a fundamental part of functioning democracies, as they are tasked with translating the needs and opinions of citizens into policy. All established democracies have a multi-party system in which different parties gather around an ideology and develop a comprehensive socio-economic programme. Political parties are a necessary instrument for broad political participation and a mechanism for deciding trade-offs between various policy options – having assertive political parties in opposition ensures governmental accountability.

The EU is founded on democratic principles and promotes them as an intrinsic value, both internally and in its external relations. Democracy is understood as a representative, multi-party system in which decision-makers are directly or indirectly accountable to citizens.

Despite their central function, political parties do not play a major role in EU democracy support programmes. In this regard, ENoP will hereby be arguing in favour of increased support for political parties in partner countries. While support for civil society organisations and other seemingly politically neutral actors is important, this alone does not suffice to support the construction and consolidation of a functioning multi-party democracy. Due to their unique role in democratic society, political parties cannot be neglected if support for democracy is to deliver sustainable results.

This discussion paper will explore three specific functions of political parties and how these functions can be fostered. Firstly, it will demonstrate how parties are complementary to civil society and how bridging efforts can be made. Secondly, the paper will explain how policy and ideology must be at the centre of party support schemes. Thirdly, the paper will argue that internal democracy within the parties prepares future political leaders for democratic politics.

ENoP members are strategically placed to contribute to this process. Not only have they acquired decades of experience in democracy support and civic education in Europe, they also have a long-standing presence in partner countries all over the world, working with both political parties and civil society organisations. This paper aims at sharing that experience in order to shed light on the central functions of political parties, in consolidated as well as in emerging democracies. ENoP will thereby seek to contribute to an articulated view on the role and function of political parties, and to present them as essential partners in effective democracy support.

2. Introduction

In numerous meetings, representatives from the European Commission (DG Devco) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) voiced their intention to explore the possibility of further developing support for political parties in external relations, as part of their democracy support strategy.

In order to assess the current state of play, the European Commission initiated a study entitled "Mapping and Study on Performance Indicators for EU support to political parties" (January 2014). This comprehensive analysis explores current and past EU-funded projects in support of political parties in non-EU countries. When direct support is excluded from EU programmes, there are still various possibilities to involve political parties indirectly. Some examples include support via civil society organisations (CSOs) and political foundations or other projects with a multi-party approach.

With regard to the implementation of the EU Agenda for Action on Democracy Support in EU External Relations (2009), the ongoing analysis of the second generation of pilot countries is also expected to contribute to this dialogue.

In a previous policy paper entitled "Supporting political parties for democracy" (2013), ENoP highlighted and compared various approaches on involving political parties in democracy support.

This current discussion paper aims to respond to the enhanced interest from EU institutions, by feeding into the ongoing debate. It argues in favour of recognising and involving democratic political parties as crucial actors as well as important target groups for democracy support. Their inclusion would also add substance to the EU Agenda for Action on Democracy Support in EU External Relations (2009), in which political parties and elected politicians are specifically mentioned as target groups.

In the first section, the paper examines the nature and importance of political parties. In the second part, the relationship between political parties and civil society is analysed, with the third section focusing on policy development – which should be at the core of any political party in a multi-party democracy. The last part highlights the importance of the internal democracy of political parties and provides information on support from political foundations in this field. The conclusion provides some concrete recommendations for EU institutions.

3. Why political parties matter

Political parties are not normally institutions that enjoy high levels of trust from the general population. However, parties compete in elections for governing states, regions and cities and the voters vote for them. Political pluralism based on competing political parties is a common denominator in all dynamic and consolidated democracies; citizens do vote for political parties as their representatives in public decision-making.

Political parties are better than their reputations suggest. Policy innovation, modernisation, democratisation and social reform are often introduced to the national political agenda by parties, and are achieved through the work of party members who have been elected to office.

Ideally, a political party brings together citizens with a common world view or ideology and a perceived common interest. A factor unique to political parties as social movements is that they need to take full responsibility for the policies they introduce – and for the consequences they might have. Political parties must make trade-offs between conflicting benefits, and accept that political reforms have some negative as well as positive consequences.

Political parties are, at best, a mechanism for political participation and engagement. In a democratically organised political party, the members have a say in the party's policy, and thereby possibly in the future of the country. Most dynamic parties have special youth wings and women's movements to strengthen the participation of these two key social groups.

Political parties train the leaders of the future. In a democratic party, members receive training in democratic decision-making, debate, discourse, dialogue and outreach. When candidates are included on the electoral roll, their credibility and political skills have already been tested within the party. Investing in young politicians is thereby an investment in the future political leadership.

Political parties in opposition are instrumental in ensuring the accountability of government. Opposition parties scrutinise the performance of those in power and offer alternative proposals for society to take into consideration. The opposition must have a place at the table when policy priorities such as development aid are discussed between donors and partners.

All in all, democratic politics is necessary for well-functioning political parties. For EU institutions wishing to support democratic development, there are no shortcuts that can eliminate the need to engage with democratically elected political parties.

4. How to support political parties?

4.1 Differences between political parties and civil society organisations

Modern and effective democracy needs institutions and organisations that represent the will and interests of citizens as authentically as possible. These can be associations, informal groups or CSOs. Political parties in particular fulfil this representative function; they offer citizens the possibility of influencing politics and political decisions and are thus an important instrument and institution of politics.

Political foundations have been promoting the concept of democratic and programmatic parties for decades, strengthening and assisting the establishment of political parties across the world. Meanwhile, the political arena has shifted shape, with the aggregation and organisation of political interests surpassing the institutionalised framework of parliamentary democracy. Since the 1970s, citizens have been increasingly associating themselves beyond the traditional forms of socio-political organisation such as parties, trade unions or cooperatives.

A conjunction of interests may well simply take place across various internet platforms or, even less institutionalised, through people spontaneously gathering for a demonstration in the streets. Given today's new means of electronic communication, protests and political activism have become more informal and ad-hoc. Many CSOs today have their roots in political or socio-economic projects and movements. The Occupy movements, the Iranian Green movement, the Turkish Taksin square protesters, OTPOR in Serbia, the *Indignados* in Spain, the students in Venezuela, *Y'en a marre* in Senegal and also the protests of the Arab Spring show that the demands of protest movements can vary greatly.

However, neither mass movements nor CSOs can be elected to the democratic and inclusive parliaments that they have called for during their protests. They would have to form a party themselves, and seek popular support. Influential and vocal groups want to maintain their movement or network character, which is sometimes even accompanied by an explicit refusal of any organisational structure. Nevertheless, in a fully functioning democracy it is not sufficient to have one's political demands heard, they must also be fed into the political process, turning claims into constitutional political decisions with full political accountability. In a representative democracy, the only way to ensure this is via elected representatives from political parties.

Many CSOs are single-issue oriented. They do not explain the correlations between different policy areas as parties do. Ideally, parties aggregate and articulate interests from various fields and develop a comprehensive policy approach for society.

CSOs or movements are capable of creating a revolutionary and transformative momentum. However, this momentum must be transformed into a stable political force with the stamina to put up with the sometimes slow and often tiresome procedures of democracy. This process of adaptation to different forms of democracy has been neglected by many global democracy promoters, including the European Institutions.

4.2 Linking Political Parties with Civil Society

In an ideal scenario, CSOs and social movements would cooperate with political parties. Sometimes they have matching agendas - a political party with an anti-discrimination profile can for instance link up with organisations advocating for the rights of people with disabilities. The organisations advise the party about which policy is needed, and the party can push for and implement the policy. Many social democratic parties have close relationships with trade union movements; some political parties cooperate closely with religious movements: the roles of political parties and CSOs are complementary.

However, in the highly polarised societies of emerging and young democracies the relationship between political parties and CSOs is often toxic. The rift between them usually prevents any form of constructive dialogue and hampers the overall democratic consolidation process. When it comes to the question of who is to blame, neither side falls short of accusations. Whereas local CSOs consider political parties only as an alliance of convenience that struggles for power and state resources, political parties consider CSOs as being predominantly donor-driven and overly dependent on international funding, and thus not representative of the local population. In other words: each side considers the other as elitist and detached from reality as well as from the needs of the citizens.

In actual fact, they both have a point. In emerging and young democracies, where state institutions are still weak and local populations often unaware of their political rights, some political parties use their power to blur the lines between the political, economic and judicial systems for their own benefit. The establishment and enforcement of the rule of law is essential for consolidating democracy.

There is no doubt that CSOs need to continue with critical assessment of political parties. However, CSOs should at the same time actively seek to communicate with reform-oriented party members. Such a constructive dialogue should be established in order to exchange views on the problems transition countries are facing. Besides weak institutions and widespread corruption, a high level of unemployment puts added and severe constraints on state and society.

Many newly elected decision makers in young and emerging democracies lack the knowledge or experience of how to address "bread and butter" issues in practice, beyond the campaign slogans of their parties. There is a strong need for expertise in order to improve the quality of political decision-making in this respect. CSOs can provide knowledge and proposals thanks to their focus on specific issues. At the same time, civil society activists can learn more about how political decisions are made and how to effectively channel their contribution into the process.

Certainly, in order to establish a constructive dialogue, political parties also need to become more responsive to the needs of civil society. Politicians are often reluctant to engage with CSOs as they do not feel obliged to do so, particularly in those countries with a history of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Since the link between both is indispensable to make a modern democracy work, this legacy must be overcome. Political foundations support this process in many countries. They encourage political partners and CSOs to develop strong ties through a wide range of activities. Enhancing accountability and transparency is a key principle for building new trust and the precondition for consolidating democracy.

Political Foundations usually work with parties as well as CSOs. This is one of their strengths: political foundations can function as mediators between state democracy and civil society.

4.3 Political parties and policy development

Political parties with the task of addressing and confronting the challenges in society need to have a broad-based programme. The party programme needs to have a concept of the limits of individual expression insofar it affects others, and there needs to be a view on the role of tradition as opposed to innovation and change. It should entail an economic policy and a concept of wealth creation and should also outline its political claims and convictions on education, health, environment, retirement benefits, defence spending, transportation and food security, amongst many other issues.

At best, political parties share a concept of society and common values. Some parties place a stronger emphasis on government action as a generator of wealth. Some parties value the individual's ability to influence his or her own earnings. Some value tradition, others focus on environmental issues. In essence, parties have ideologies and aim to offer citizens a coherent and normative vision for society.

A political party that brings value to the political process has a developed policy. Ideology does not end with slogans and the naming of arch enemies: this must also be translated into policy. Political parties in EU member states have important experience to share in this regard. Many of Europe´s democratic parties have a long history of being in and out of government and of developing and implementing policy and reforms. In the European Parliament, they are organised in kindred ideological groups.

In a democratically organised political party, the role of the party congress is crucial. It is congress that defines party policy and adopts the party programme for the coming period. The party is held accountable to what it writes in its programme. Party members hold their leadership accountable if they deviate from what has been established in the programme. The political debate inside the party has great depth and quality compared to debates held during election campaigns.

Political foundations in EU member states serve as the bridge between political parties in Europe and those in other countries. Study visits, meetings among the likeminded, political education, open and frank discussions between peers, training sessions – the range of activities is very broad.

4.4 Promoting the internal democracy of political parties

The internal democracy of political parties cannot be distinguished from the state of political culture in a society. Rather, they are highly interlinked, as political parties are expected to engage in the same democratic values on which the democratic system is built.

Political parties should be democratic not only externally but also internally, through their organisational practices such as candidate and leadership selection, policy-making, membership relations and ensuring representativeness. However, in many countries a lack of democratic experience prevails and manifests itself in political parties that are dominated by the elite, lack member participation, exert authoritarian ways of ruling, non-democratic means of nominating candidates or high levels of clientelism. Supporting the internal democracy of political parties demands long-term commitment, as trust must be cultivated – a task that many political foundations undertake worldwide. The aim of supporting the internal democracy of parties is to develop more transparent, legitimate and inclusive political parties for society as a whole.

The democratisation of society calls for citizen participation, and in representative democracies it is the task of political parties to mobilise them. Support for developing the internal democracy of parties by focusing on participation and representation can foster this process. When giving support, a bottom-up approach and activating grass-roots level members will have many benefits. Democratic awareness of activists themselves will be raised, and through their participation interactive connections between politics, political parties and ordinary citizens can be created. Representativeness of political parties can be supported by strengthening the voice of women, youth and minorities. In democratic parties the voice of underrepresented groups is heard and delivered in the parties' decision-making bodies, and reflected in the nomination of candidates.

Political foundations promote the internal democracy of political parties by supporting participatory activities among grass-roots, youth, women and minority groups. They also build the capacities of these groups through political education, training sessions and other activities. Democratic attitudes and practices are learned through experience. In these activities, the democratic approach is employed and activists learn by doing. The role of political foundations is especially remarkable when laying the groundwork for intra-party forums and dialogues with party management about internal democracy. The peer-to-peer approach of political foundations working with their sister-parties is a crucial benefit when dealing with the delicate issue of internal democracy, which parties rarely share with others.

Internal democracy will increase citizens' confidence in political parties, as the democratic governance of the party will mitigate impressions of political parties as an instrument of elite power, thereby encouraging the democratic participation of citizens.

5. Recommendations

As an outcome of the observations of this paper and the joint reflection work of the ENoP working group on Democracy Support we propose to the European Institution to take the following recommendations into account:

1. Enhancing EU support to capacity-building for political parties;

2. Finding new formats to increase the presence of political party representatives (including from opposition parties) in policy dialogues and consultations concerning development and democracy assistance programmes;

3. Supporting concrete and hands-on work of political parties (training of activists, organisation of domestic electoral observations, etc..) thus recognising them as important change agents in non-democratic transition countries;

4. Increased involvement of political parties in the field of democracy assistance, policy dialogue and development consultations;

5. Supporting structured dialogue between civil society organisations and democratic political parties;

6. Continuing to support dialogue programmes that bolster democratic party systems, meanwhile enabling support for individual parties in that system;

7. Ensuring that EU delegations hold regular meetings with opposition parties, democratic movements and political foundations;

8. Ensuring that the EC and EEAS proactively seek the assistance of European democracy actors in facilitating direct exchanges with political and civil society actors from partner countries;

9. Taking advantage of existing networks such as ENoP, which cover the spectrum of party families represented in the European Parliament and allow for peer-to-peer party assistance, thereby engaging bilaterally with sister parties at a project level and guaranteeing an inclusive approach at a programmatic level;

10. The Parties represented in the European Parliament continuing and reinforcing their presence in discussions on strengthening kindred parties outside the EU, in the neighbourhood and beyond;

11. Enhancing the European Parliament's involvement in multilateral organisations: MEPs should have an active role in commenting on and participating in, for instance, UN and OSCE discussions.

The European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP) is the representative platform of currently 68 political foundations from 25 countries. ENoP unites member foundations from six party families (ALDE, EPP, S&D, ECR, Greens/EFA, GUE/NGL). Political Foundations have been active players in the field of democracy support for several decades. On the one hand, they contribute to effective development and democratisation policies by implementing projects on the ground. On the other hand, they develop policy ideas and contribute to agenda-setting in the national and EU context. Since its establishment in 2006 ENoP has become a trusted partner of EU institutions and an important actor in the field of democracy support. The network currently enjoys the financial support of the European Commission in the framework of the co-funded project "Building a bridge towards socio-political stakeholders for an effective EU development assistance – enhanced dialogue with and within the European Network of Political Foundations".

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