

# EMBRACING A WIDER RANGE OF ACTORS

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### Introduction

International relations have become an increasingly complex arena that includes an ever growing and diverse set of actors. Besides state institutions and persons representing the state, these also encompass a variety of nationally, transnationally and internationally operating non-state actors. The interests of a wide range of non-state actors can deviate from those of the traditional foreign policy-makers in the respective countries.

The proliferation of agents of international relations reflects the transformations that have been taking place within most societies around the globe. In particular, neoliberal interventions have had drastic effects on the functioning of the state. In most parts of the global southern neoliberal reform, policies entailed the end of the state-centric model, in which the state and its institutions were perceived as the premier authority for promoting development and maintaining security (Günay, 2008).

**The Arab Spring revealed the huge number and the diversity of non-state agents that had grown under the surface of authoritarianism.**

The turmoil in the course of the Arab Spring confirmed the weakening capacities of the Arab states to shape and transform their societies and revealed the huge number and diversity of non-state agents that had grown under the surface of authoritarianism. The EU's policies in reaction to the developments seemed to acknowledge the increasingly complex cartography of political power in the region (Back, Keith, Khan, Shukra and Solomos, 2009). After self-critique – Commissioner Štefan Füle stated that the EU and its Member States had fallen prey to the assumption that authoritarian regimes were a guarantee of stability in the region (Füle in Tocci, 2011) – the Union reviewed its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The reviewed ENP entails various new financial instruments, programmes and initiatives, more country-specific approaches and claims stronger support for locally rooted civil society actors (Behr & Siitonen, 2013). In particular, the newly-established Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility as well as the European Endowment of Democracy have aimed at supporting democratisation in the region through civil society assistance.

### Normative Conceptions of Democracy and Civil Society

**The EU's and its Member States' conception of democracy is strongly shaped by liberal paradigms.**

Compared to its involvement in the democratic transformations of the former communist states in Eastern Europe, the EU's support for democratisation in the Arab world has been relatively weak. From a European perspective, different from the fall of the communist regimes, the events of the Arab Spring did not signify the victory of western liberalism over eastern despotism. Although, for a short period, the call for values such as freedom and democracy raised hopes for the proliferation of liberal democracy in the Arab world, these hopes soon dwindled with the rise of Islamist actors. The EU's and its Member States' conception of democracy is strongly shaped by liberal paradigms. The concept of liberal democracy became hegemonic after the end of the Cold War. Democracy promoters around the globe have perceived liberal democracy as a teleological and universal model that can be applied anywhere, leaving other concepts of democratic rule, such

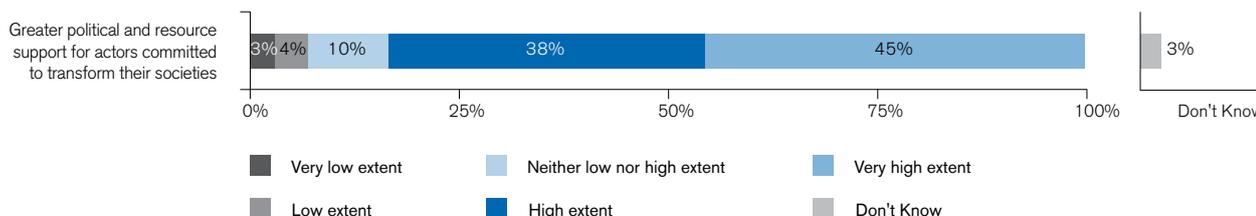
as social or participatory democracy aside (Haller, 2015). The democratisation of other societies was seen as a technical process that entailed the adaptation of institutional and organisational settings modelled on western experiences. Carothers (1999) speaks in this context of the application of a “democracy template”.

The role civil rights movements had played in the transformations of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe advanced the idea of the democratising potential of civil society. Civil society, perceived as an independent civic control institution opposed to the state or as an arbiter between state and society, came to be seen as a *sine qua non* of liberal democracy and a prerequisite for democratisation (Radu, 2009). This idea of civil society as a facilitator of democratisation gained popularity among academics as well as policy-makers and activists around the world, and has been “seen as both an explanatory variable and as a normative idea” (Behr & Siitonen, 2013, p. 7). Hence, assistance for civil society and support through funding became a core element of democracy assistance.

Although civil society assistance and exchange between civil society actors within the EuroMed area has been an important element of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and later the ENP, the effect of these policies proved to be rather weak. This has led 83% of the participants of the 6th Euromed Survey to state that they believe (to a high or very high extent) that non-state actors should be involved more effectively and on a broader basis in order to making the ENP more effective. But which civil society actors should be involved?

When it comes to the question related to the exclusion of countries that do not commit to reforms, the analysis of the results highlights that some of those who argue that these countries should be excluded would advise dealing with civil society instead.

**Graph 1: To what extent can these measures make the ENP structures more cooperative and inclusive to civil society actors?**



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 6th Euromed Survey/Question 18

## The Contested Nature of Civil Society

The EU's liberal concept of civil society as a benign force acting as a buffer or intermediary between state and society assumes a generally agreed definition of civil society. Hardly acknowledging different historical developments and functions of civil society within Europe (ranging from state dependent to independent civil society formations) (White, 2004) and different theoretical approaches, – Gramsci sees civil society as an extension of the state and as an instrument to enforce hegemony (2005) – the concept remains rather vague. It is not clear whether civil society simply refers to all non-state actors, if it entails interest groups such as trade unions, syndicates and business associations or whether it only refers to NGOs. Besides that, can media be labelled as part of civil society? Does the concept only refer to institutionalised and licensed organisations and associations? Or are social movements, thematic platforms, informal networks and other un-institutionalised formations also part of civil society? After all, although they do not match with EU standards and normative conceptions of associations, they do often fulfil the same functions as civil society organisations in a European definition; they promote thematic issues and serve as an arbiter, counter-weight

**Some of the respondents who argue that countries not committed to reform should be excluded would advise dealing with civil society.**

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or even antidote to the state (Günay, 2015). In other words, despite its common reference, civil society remains an essentially contested concept that is characterised by a plurality of meanings, which evolve differently depending on the context – encompassing time, place and the societies involved (Haller, 2015).

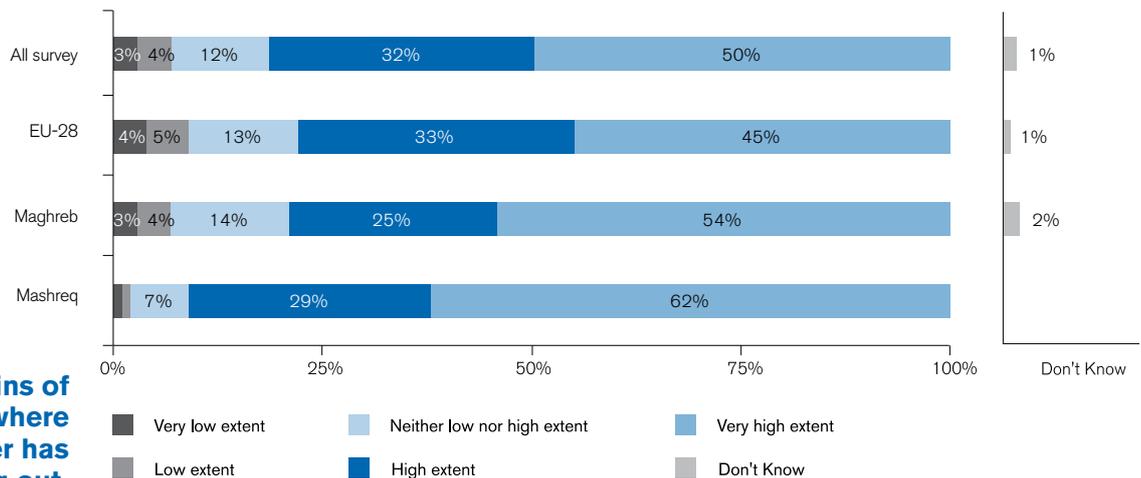
The EU's normative liberal definition of civil society builds on Europe's experiences with enlightenment and secular assumptions about religion and politics. In that sense, it is reflective of a secularist European epistemology which produces a certain understanding of what can be considered as “normal politics”. The situation in Muslim societies has been often perceived as a deviation from this norm, either due to the appearance of Islam in politics and its equation with fundamentalism or intolerance, or its appearance as “ill-fitting imitations of a Western secular ideal” (Shakman-Hurd, 2007). Again, this perception denies the variety of secular practices in different European countries and assumes a generally accepted and agreed model of secularism.

The programmes and initiatives aimed at civil society assistance in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries and the standards and norms applied in regard to which organisations and associations have been acknowledged as civil society organisations (CSOs) and which not can also be seen as a feature of the EU's general ambition to extend its own rules and norms beyond its borders. Schimmelfennig holds that the EU has acted as a power that is “civilizing the international system by transforming it into a system of rule-based governance according to its own model” (Schimmelfennig, 2010, p. 5).

The EU's narrow liberal conception of civil society has ignored important agents of social and political change on the ground. This sense is also confirmed by respondents to the Survey, particularly those from the southern countries, among whom a large number highlight the need for a better knowledge of local actors.

**The EU's narrow liberal conception of civil society has ignored important agents of social and political change on the ground.**

**Graph 2: To what extent can these measures make the ENP structures more cooperative and inclusive to civil society actors across Southern Neighbourhood Partner countries?: Increased capacities of the EU officials on the ground to understand the needs and to better support local actors**



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 6th Euromed Survey/Question 14

**At the margins of the state, where state power has been fraying out, established Islamic organisations but particularly informal networks based on religious affiliations or kinship have often compensated the absence of state institutions.**

While in most parts of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries, “western-style civil society organisations” have promoted values such as human, women’s and minority rights that resonated with a liberal western discourse and could therefore raise the attention of external supporters and donors, a large variety of informal, un-institutionalised movements and networks have filled the vacuum left behind by the state’s withdrawal from social welfare in the course of neoliberal interventions. At the margins of the state, where state power has been fraying

out, established Islamic organisations but particularly informal networks based on religious affiliations or kinship have often compensated the absence of state institutions. By providing welfare, social order and security they have often functioned like local authorities (Günay, 2012). The responsiveness of this broad variety of un-institutionalised networks to basic local needs has given them wide support and recognition by local populations (Lee & Shitrit, 2014).

Informal networks and local institutions can be a base for self-organisation; they can function as arbiters between the formal and informal space and thereby secure the basic needs of otherwise excluded people and even promote their active participation in political processes. Often starting to evolve at the family level, they can develop beyond that and form interest groups according to certain ideas and needs. Therefore, informal networks are not necessarily exclusively informed by primordial ties, but can be inclusive and multi-functional (Harders & Schaubert, 1999). One can conclude that un-institutionalised platforms and informal networks have been important agents of social and political change.

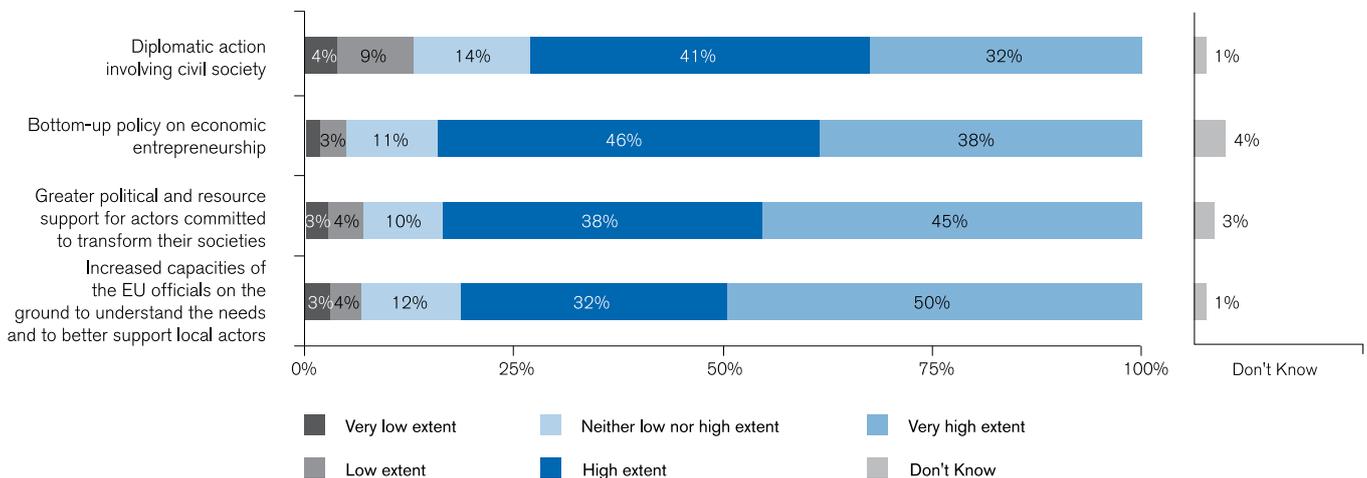
However, the EU's normative understanding of what can be considered as civil society and as eligible partners for cooperation (Hobson & Kurki, 2013) had the effect that most of these potential agents of social and political change have remained off its radars.

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### How to Embrace a Wider Range of Actors

As the results of the 6th Euromed Survey illustrate, a large majority of respondents think that in order to make the ENP more effective a larger number of non-state actors should be embraced. Again, with 82%, a large majority of respondents believes that increased capacities of EU officials on the ground would be an important measure to make the ENP structures more cooperative and inclusive.

**Graph 3: To what extent can these measures make the ENP structures more cooperative and inclusive to civil society actors across Southern Neighbourhood Partner countries?**



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 6th Euromed Survey/Question 18

However, in order to be effective (support democratic dynamics and assist agents of political and social change), EU policies and officials should be able to move beyond normative conceptions that have been produced out of a Eurocentric perspective. A more effective ENP would require a more pluralistic and diverse strategy that also includes social and political dynamics that do not fit into the EU's liberal conceptions. This would entail social movements that have emerged in various European societies as well as informal networks and platforms

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that do play a crucial role in many southern societies. Considering the weakening capacities of state institutions and agencies, these local providers of social cohesion and order might constitute important partners in the fight against terrorism, human trafficking and other security issues. In the past, the EU's and its Member States' policies shaped by secularist epistemology have failed to develop a deeper understanding for the secular tradition in Muslim countries. The inability to distinguish between the various religious actors has had the effect that most of the Islamic formations that have come to play a dominant role amongst the lower middle classes and in the poor suburban areas have remained outside the radar of the European Union. Remaining confined by normative conceptions of civil society has the effect that relations between the EU and southern societies remain limited to western-style NGOs. Most of them promote important liberal values but often their activities have been limited to the large cities and they have been the domain of representatives of the western-educated elites. While western donors have almost exclusively supported these secular western-style associations, many Islamic associations, organisations and movements have received financial support from different Islamic donors in countries such as Qatar, Turkey or Saudi Arabia (Günay, 2015).

**Acknowledging the different dynamics in different countries, defining potential agents of change and engaging with them could promote a more tailor-made and hence more effective European Neighbourhood Policy.**

A more open approach that includes formal and informal actors involved in spiritual, political, educational or service functions could also strengthen the role of civil society as a facilitator of democracy (Golan & Salem, 2014). It would include secular and Islamist, liberal and non-liberal, state and non-state, formal and informal actors, as long as they are committed to certain norms that guarantee a dignified life. An open conception of civil society should also refrain from perceiving civil society per se as a benign force.

In particular, ideas of barely institutionalised grassroots organisations, networks and individual agents should be heard, as they are usually closer and more responsive to local demands. Rather than denying the potentials of certain actors in achieving pre-defined goals, research on how and which actors could contribute to shared goals could improve the relations with the southern neighbourhood. All in all, leaving normative assumptions aside, acknowledging the different dynamics in different countries, defining potential agents of change and engaging with them through studies, dialogue, exchange programmes and mutual training could promote a more tailor-made and hence more effective European Neighbourhood Policy.

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