

ENGAGING WITH CIVIL SOCIETY: POLICY RESPONSES

The second block was focused on the policy environment in which civil society operates, the role of foreign entities vis-à-vis civil society organisations and in particular how the EU engages with civil society in SEM countries.

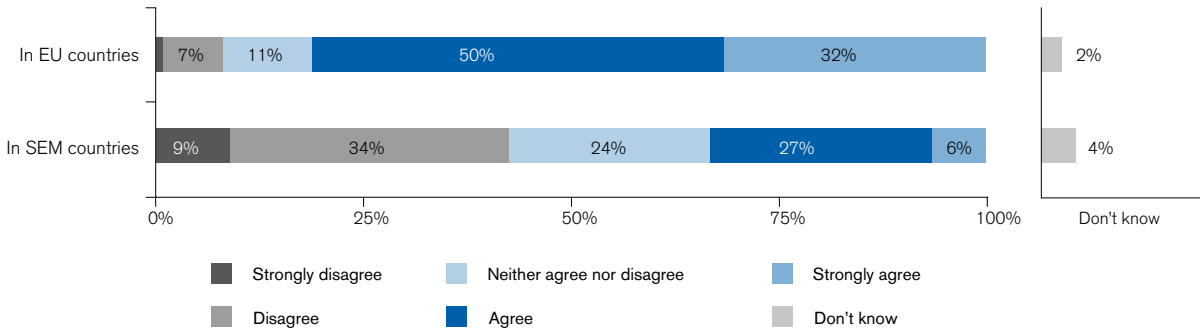
Main findings:

- The domestic situation in European countries provides a more enabling environment for civil society than in SEM countries.
- Civil society faces the biggest obstacles in Syria, Egypt, Libya and Turkey when it comes to SEM countries, and in Hungary, Poland and Romania when it comes to the EU.
- Among SEM countries, Israeli, Moroccan and Tunisian respondents are the most positive regarding the enabling environment for civil society in their respective countries, while Syrian and Palestinian respondents are at the bottom of the list.
- In the EU, respondents from Poland, Croatia and Bulgaria are most critical of the situation of civil society in their respective countries.
- The main obstacles for civil society tend to be rather political in SEM countries and rather administrative in EU countries. SEM respondents are more concerned by “political pressure on civil society activists” than by “limited funding”.
- The EU is the main source of foreign support to civil society in SEM countries according to SEM respondents, followed by the United States (US) and Qatar.
- A majority of respondents from SEM countries, in particular from Syria, Tunisia and Turkey, think that foreign support to civil society can be counter-productive.
- The role of the EU as a supporter to civil society in SEM countries is seen positively overall. However, EU respondents are more critical than SEM respondents in this respect. Respondents from SEM countries torn by conflicts are less positive regarding the role of the EU.
- Respondents agree that the EU has done “more to support civil society” over the last years, in line with the commitment it made when it revised the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2015.
- However, qualitative comments from respondents are rather negative about the role of the EU and how it calibrates its support to civil society.
- The EU should prioritise Egypt, Palestine and Syria in its support to civil society.

A RESTRICTIVE DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENT?

Question 9 was aimed at assessing to what extent the overall context enables civil society to fulfil its missions in EU countries, SEM countries and the respective countries of the respondents. Regarding EU countries, the majority of respondents “agree” that the overall context allows civil society to fulfil its mission while more respondents are in disagreement with that statement in the case of SEM countries.

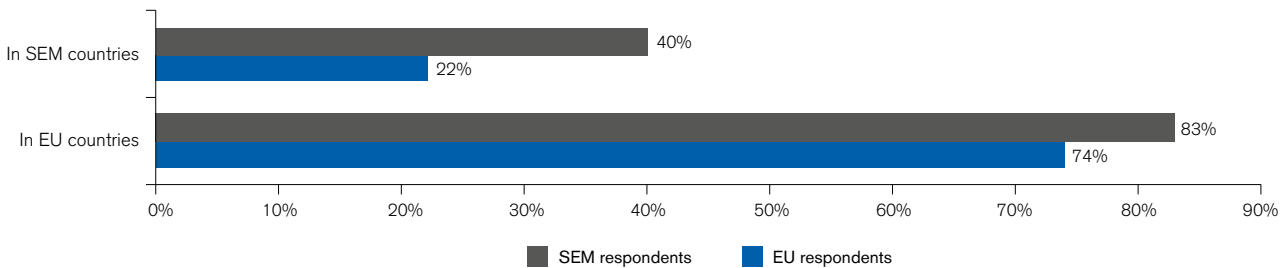
Graph 16: Do you agree that the overall context enables civil society to fulfil its missions in the following countries?



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

Respondents from SEM countries tend to be slightly less critical than their European counterparts when assessing the environment in which civil society operates, both in SEM countries and in EU countries.

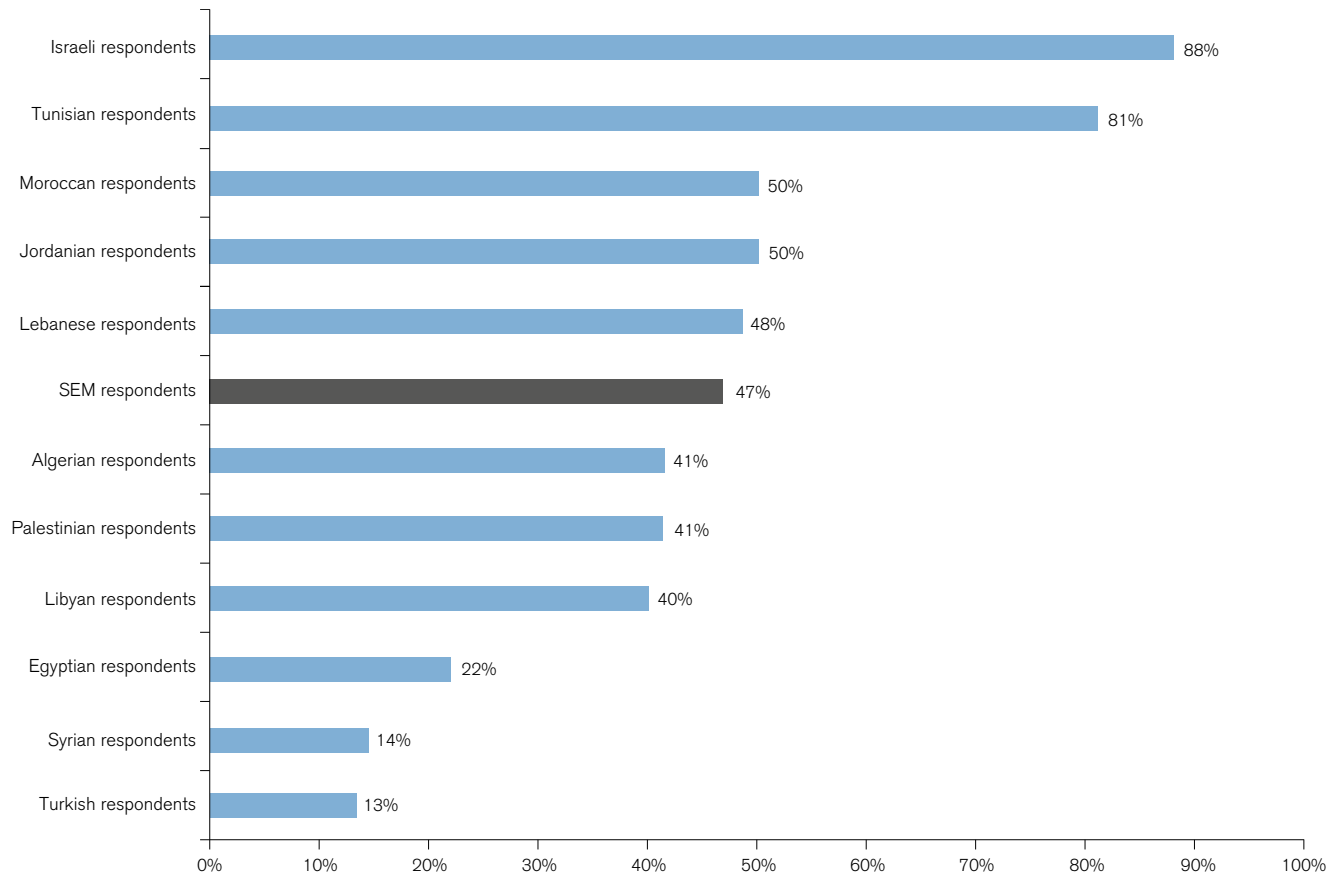
Graph 17: Do you agree that the overall context enables civil society to fulfil its missions in: (% of agree and strongly agree answers)



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

Broken down results taking into account the country of origin provide interesting insights on how respondents see the situation in their respective countries. Among respondents from SEM countries, Israelis and Tunisians are the most positive while Turkish and Syrian respondents are at the bottom of the list.

Graph 18: Do you agree that the overall context enables civil society to fulfil its missions in your country?
(% of agree and strongly agree answers)

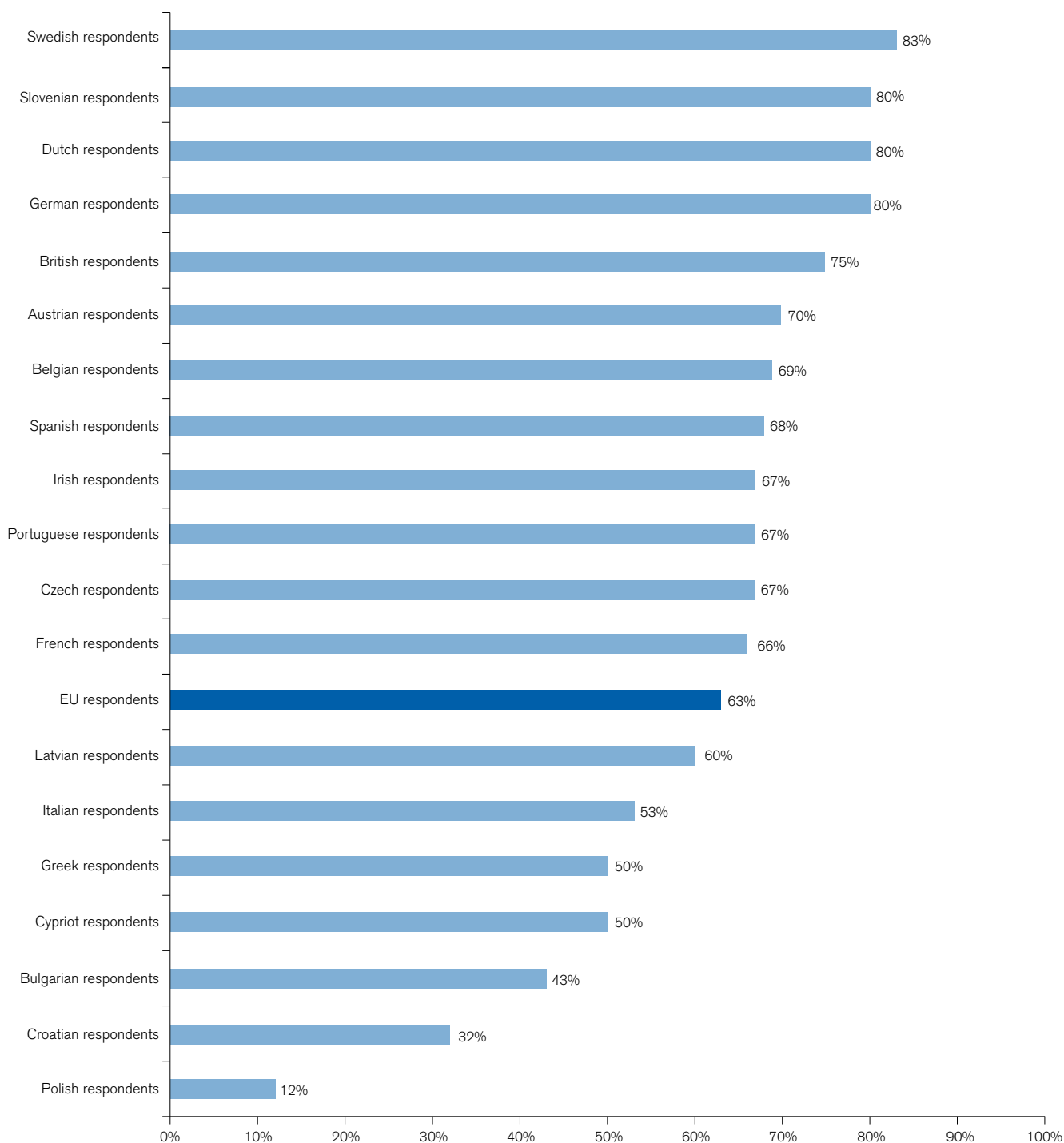


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

Respondents from EU countries are less critical overall of the domestic context in their respective countries. Results also show bigger variations from one country to another, with Swedish, Slovenian, German and Dutch respondents very positive, on the one hand, and Poles, Croats and Bulgarians more negative, on the other.

Graph 19: Do you agree that the overall context enables civil society to fulfil its missions in your country?

(% of agree and strongly agree answers)



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

Throughout their open comments, respondents dwelt on different aspects affecting the work of civil society organisations, including the hypocrisy of decision-makers, the difficult access to information, the criminalisation of the work of civil society or its politicisation:

L'impact de la société civile n'est pas encore pris suffisamment en compte par les pouvoirs décideurs dans les pays de l'UE et l'UE 'fait semblant de prendre en compte' – C'est de l'hypocrisie et un moyen de ne pas entrer en confrontation brutale. Dans les pays SEM, la forme est différente, le résultat est le même sauf il semble pour la Tunisie.

Belgian respondent

Dans les PSEM, dans certains domaines, la société civile n'a pas accès à l'information et ne peut pas jouer son rôle. Elle est cantonnée à des activités caritatives ou d'éducation où elle peut se développer sans trop de problèmes. Au Liban, le gouvernement lui confie même des tâches d'assistance sociales auxquelles il a renoncé.

Lebanese respondent

When it comes to the EU, we should make a distinction between Western European countries and Central and Eastern European countries, where the space for civil society has been significantly limited. This has led to their decreased capacity to reach its objectives and impact policies.

Polish respondent

In Palestine, civil society organisations working in economic development or human rights will not be able to fulfil their mission if the Israeli military occupation of Palestine continues.

Palestinian respondent

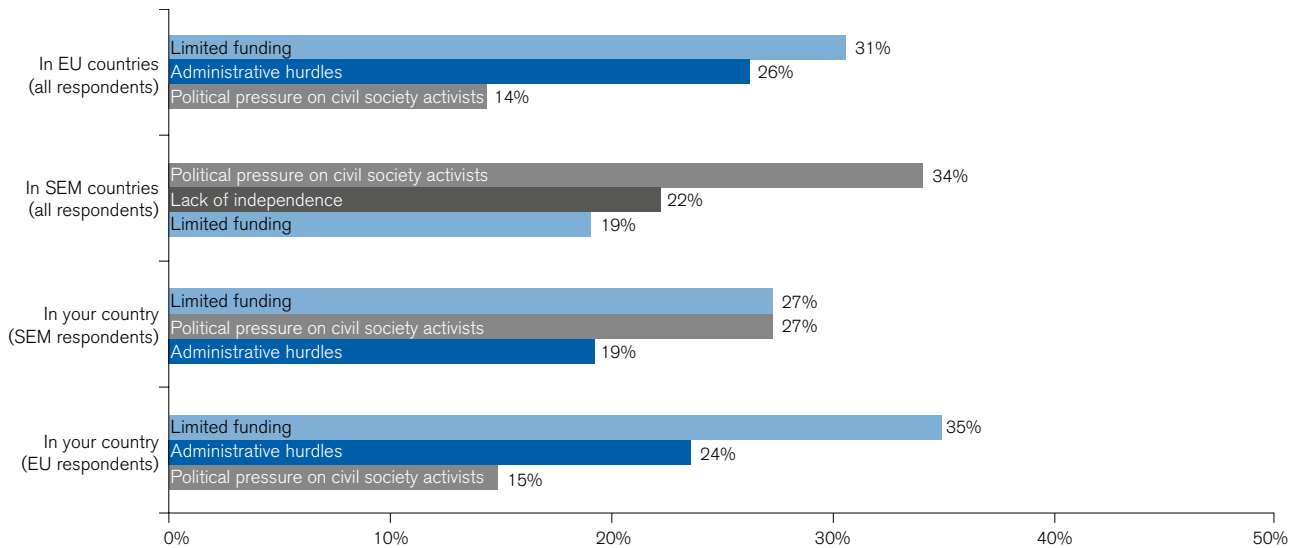
The growth of the far right and racism and the criminalisation of solidarity is not the best context for the work of civil society.

Spanish respondent

Question 10 elaborated on the obstacles facing civil society. Respondents identified political obstacles (“political pressure on civil society activists” and “lack of independence”) as the most significant ones in SEM countries and rather administrative obstacles as the main ones in EU countries (“limited funding” or “administrative hurdles”). However, asked about the situation in their own countries, SEM respondents did not identify “political pressure on civil society activists” in bigger proportions than “limited funding”.

Graph 20: What are the obstacles for establishing a successfully working civil society?

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 5)



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

In their open comments, a number of respondents pointed out the demobilisation trend in European societies, as illustrated in the first three quotes below, while others regretted that concerns by civil society were not reflected properly in policy agendas:

La démobilisation des opinions publiques européennes face à la rigidité des dirigeants. L'individualisme, l'embourgeoisement, la précarité des emplois, la difficulté à coopérer entre individus de niveau éducatif élevé.

Lebanese respondent

Lack of sense of community and participatory citizenship.

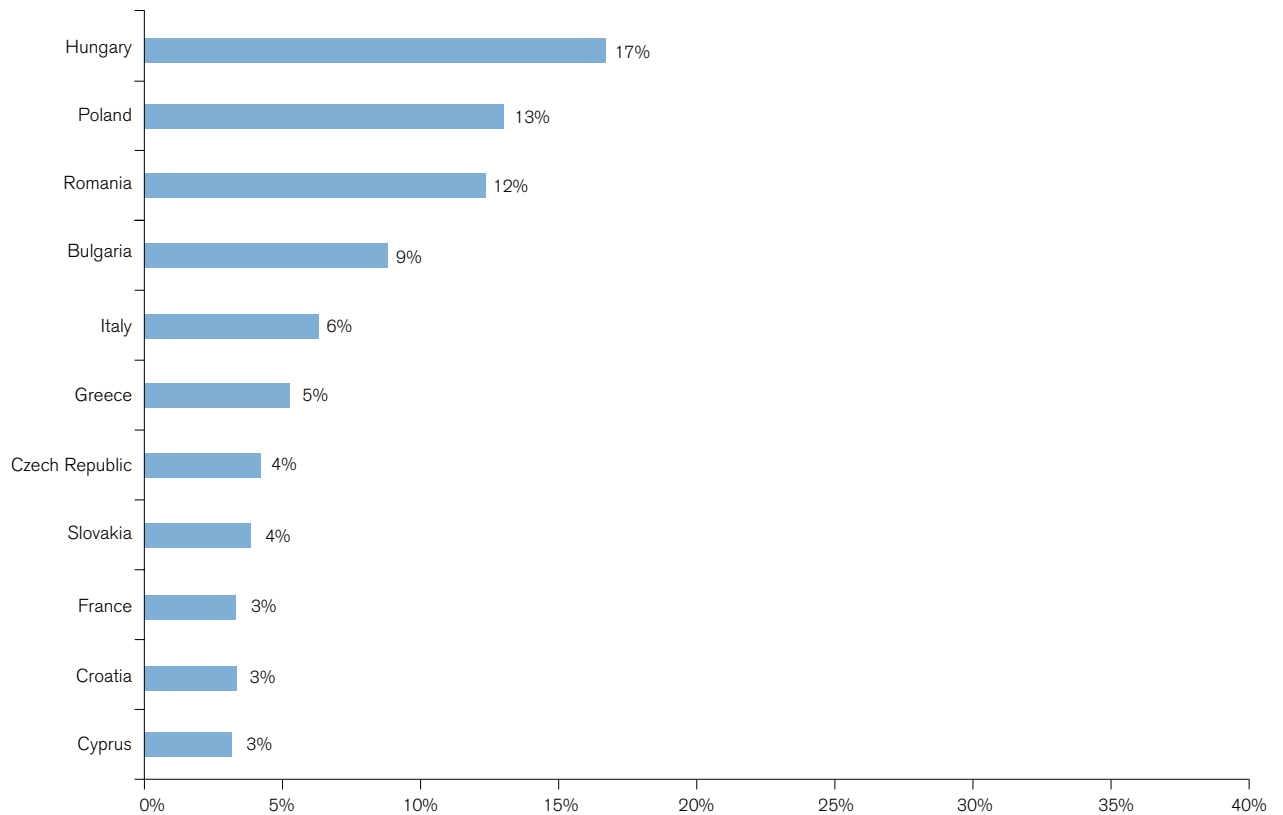
Italian respondent

Inactivity and common inertia – non-engaged, non-active citizens.

Slovenian respondent

Question 11's objective was to survey respondents on where they thought civil societies faced the biggest obstacles. Hungary, Poland and Romania are the three most-frequently mentioned countries by respondents when it comes to the EU.

Graph 21: In which countries of the European Union do civil societies face the biggest obstacles?
(respondents were asked to choose 4 options out of 28)

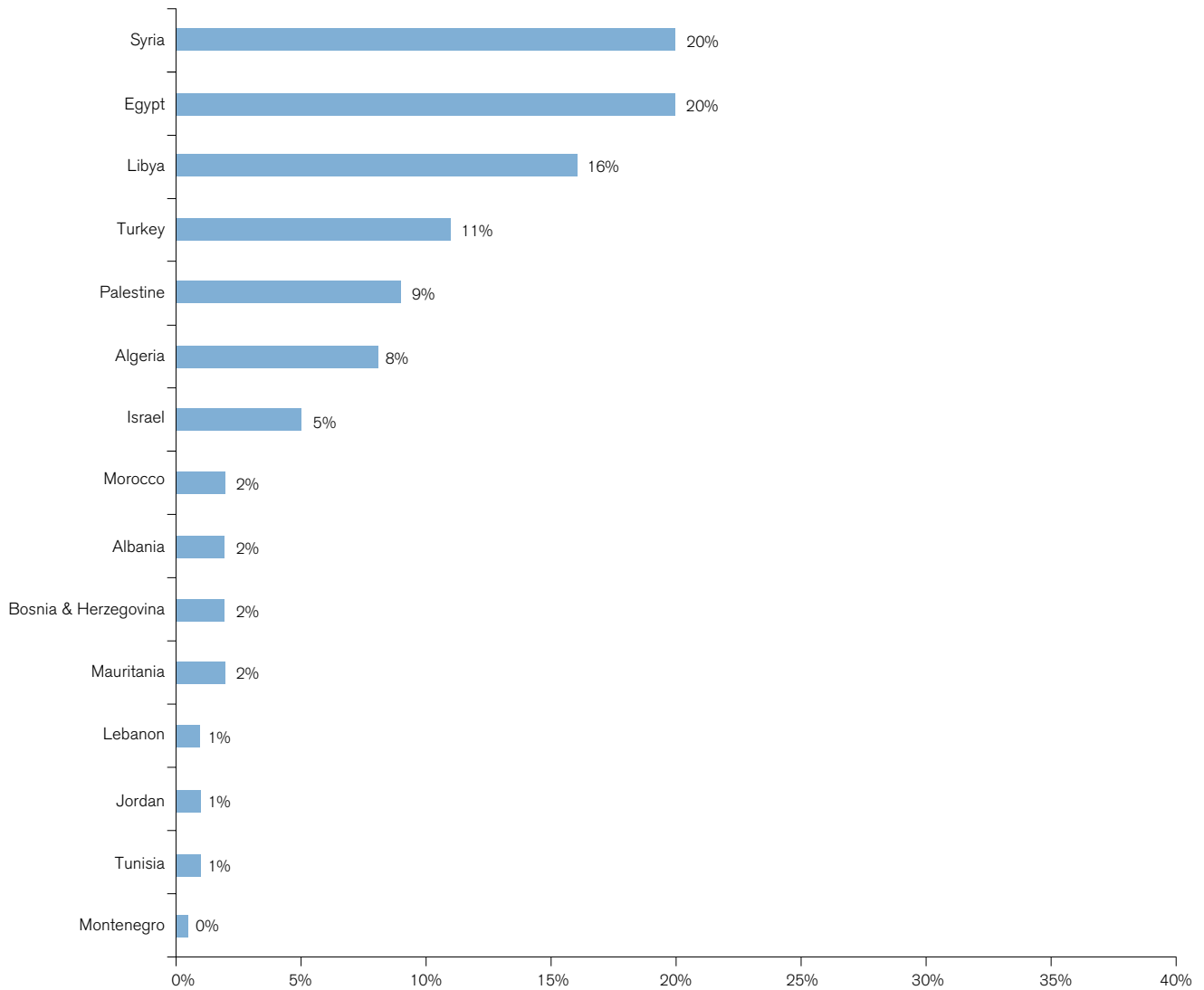


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

When it comes to SEM countries, Syria and Egypt come top of the list, followed by Libya and Turkey. Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon are among the least mentioned countries.

Graph 22: In which Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries do civil societies face the biggest obstacles?

(respondents were asked to choose 3 options out of 15)

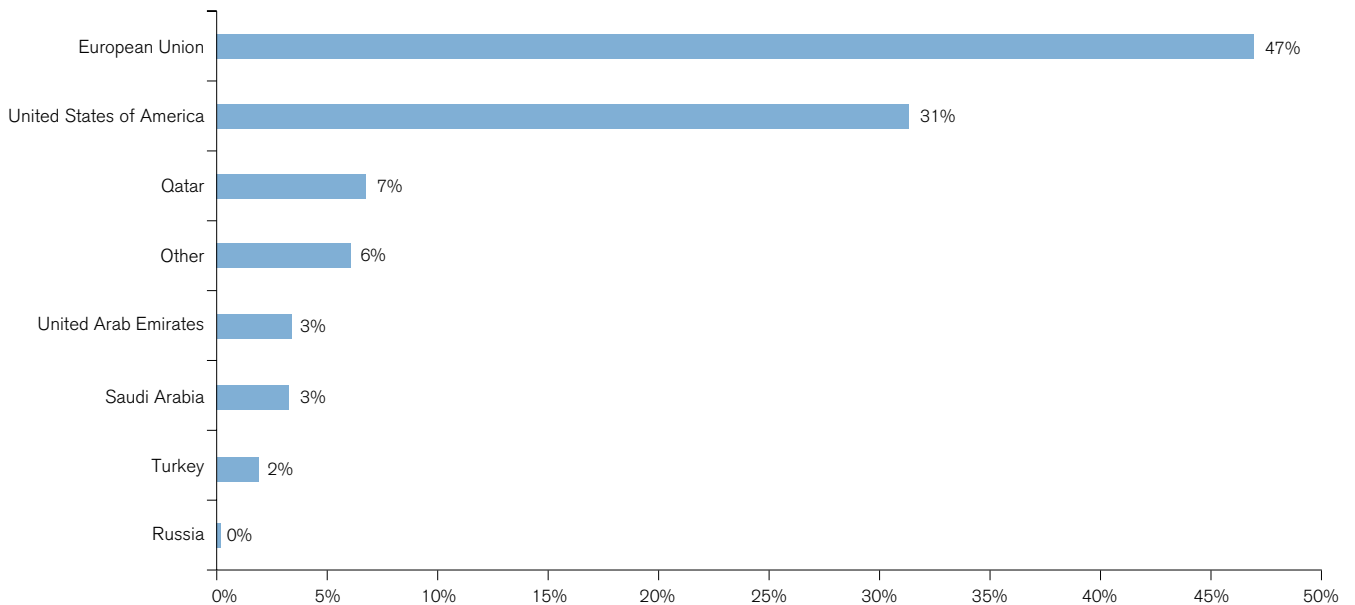


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

THE ROLE OF FOREIGN ENTITIES

Question 12 was only addressed to respondents from SEM countries with the objective of determining their perceptions regarding the origin of foreign support to civil society in their respective countries. Respondents identified the EU as the main source of foreign support to civil society, followed by the US and Qatar.

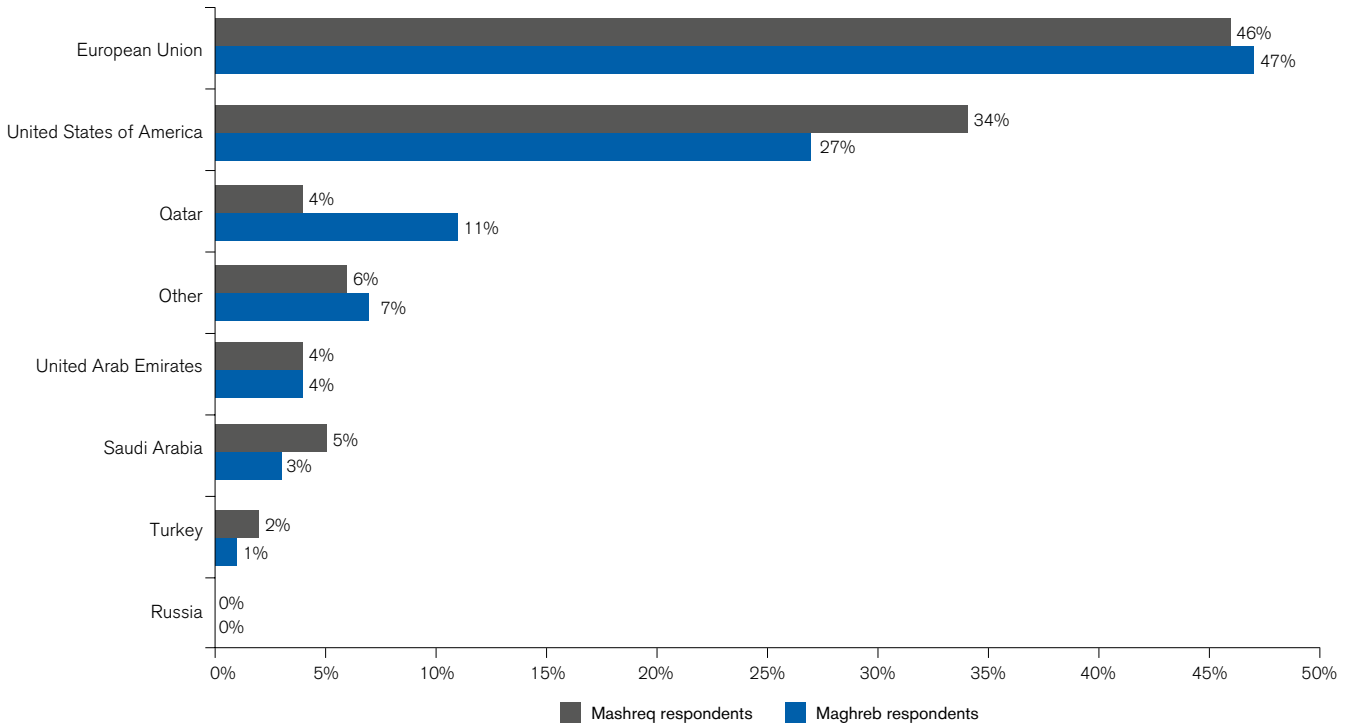
Graph 23: In your country foreign support to civil society comes mainly from:
(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 7) Respondents only from SEM countries



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

There are some differences in patterns between responses from Maghreb and Mashreq countries. The EU still features as the main foreign supporter for both, but the US is stronger in Mashreq countries than Maghreb. Maghreb respondents are also more prone to identify Qatar as the main supporter of civil society than respondents from Mashreq countries.

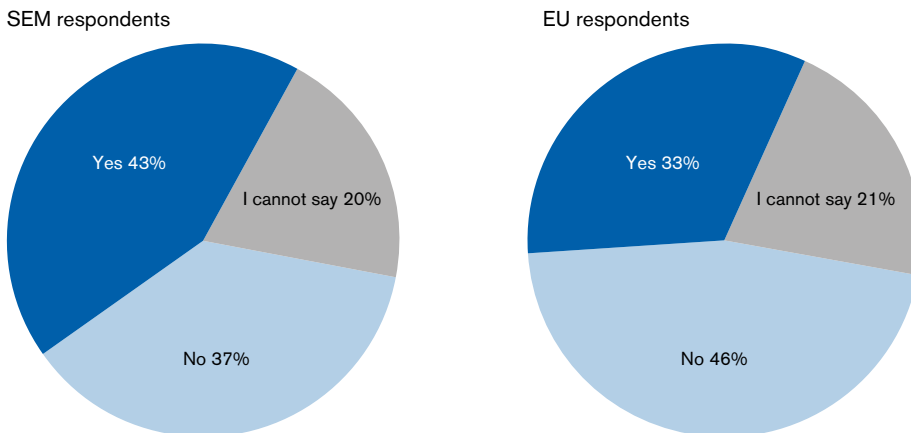
Graph 24: In your country foreign support to civil society comes mainly from:
(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 7)



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

Question 13 related to the previous question and dwelt on the issue of how counter-productive foreign support to civil society might be perceived. A relative majority of EU respondents are not concerned with foreign support in their respective countries while, in contrast, a similar majority of respondents from SEM countries think foreign support can be counter-productive.

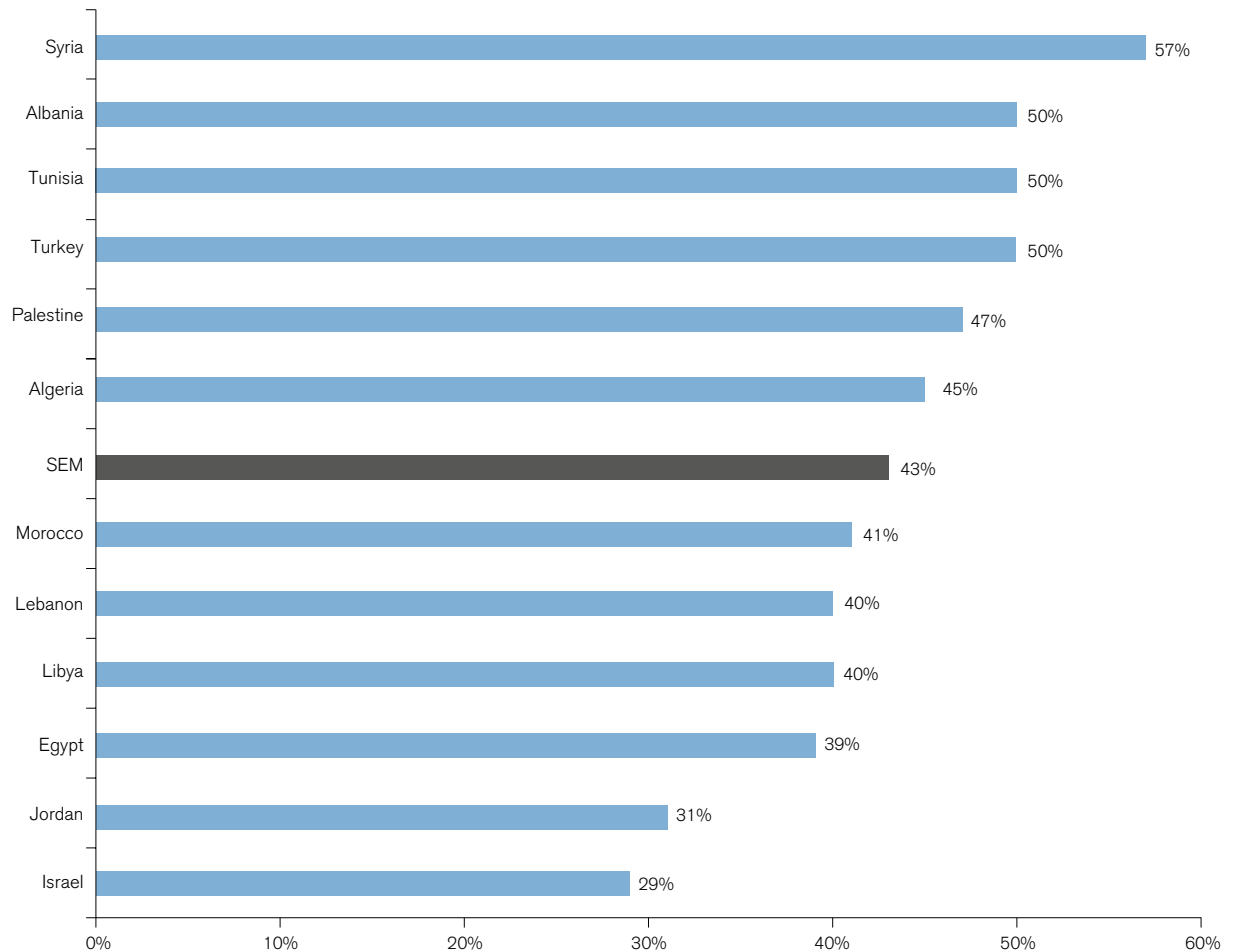
Graph 25: Do you consider that the support of civil society by foreign actors/donors can be counter-productive in your country?



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

Syrian respondents are most concerned with how counter-productive foreign support to civil society can be in their own country, followed by Albanian, Tunisian and Turkish respondents. At the bottom of the list, Israeli and Jordanian respondents are the least concerned.

Graph 26: Do you consider that the support of civil society by foreign actors/donors can be counter-productive in your country?
(% of YES answer)



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

Question 13.1 was a follow-up question as it invited respondents to elaborate on their answer and possibly identify which kind of actor could produce counter-productive interferences. Respondents pointed out some governments – Russia (especially among respondents from northern European countries), the US, China, the Gulf monarchies and Turkey – but they also pointed out the EU and private donors.

As an illustration of counter-productive support, several respondents indicated that some organisations are distracted from their core activities and encouraged to adjust their work to match the donors' priorities or requirements:

Les bailleurs de fonds sont exigeants en termes de montage et de mise en œuvre des projets, et les associations dans les territoires n'ont pas forcément les compétences pour accéder aux financements, par manque de compétences ou en raison de la barrière de la langue, et ceci peut créer plus de disparités entre le centre urbain et les collectivités territoriales, spécialement rurales et enclavées.

Moroccan respondent

In the case of the EU support to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society actors, this does not pose any particular problem, but this support is far from compensating the influence of the big lobbies on European decisions, particularly with regard to the pharmaceutical industry, pesticides or even foreign policy. In the case of support from the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, to Islamic movements, there is a definite fear of a harmful influence through the spread of a retrograde Wahhabi Islam.

Belgian respondent

Some of the funded NGOs are corrupt as they take funds and do not make real efforts in society. They do not have real effects on development in any sector.

Jordanian respondent

Respondents also stressed how foreign support to civil society organisations (CSOs) can expose them domestically:

Recently, the local authorities have been backlashing against civil society actors who are funded by foreign actors (mainly foreign embassies and development agencies). Tight control, threats and even judiciary prosecution are being conducted against them. They also created a culture in which common people learned to mistrust anyone who is working with foreigners, especially in a CSO context. We saw recently that CSO actors who usually work with foreign donors or participate in international events and programmes have been targeted on social media with a lot of fake news, in order to "convince" society that all similar profiles are "foreign agents", hence, affecting their credibility.

Algerian respondent

While civil society cannot survive without foreign funding in Egypt, it has now become a threat of being labelled as a spy, and using legal authoritarianism to prosecute individuals who receive funding for their NGOs.

Egyptian respondent

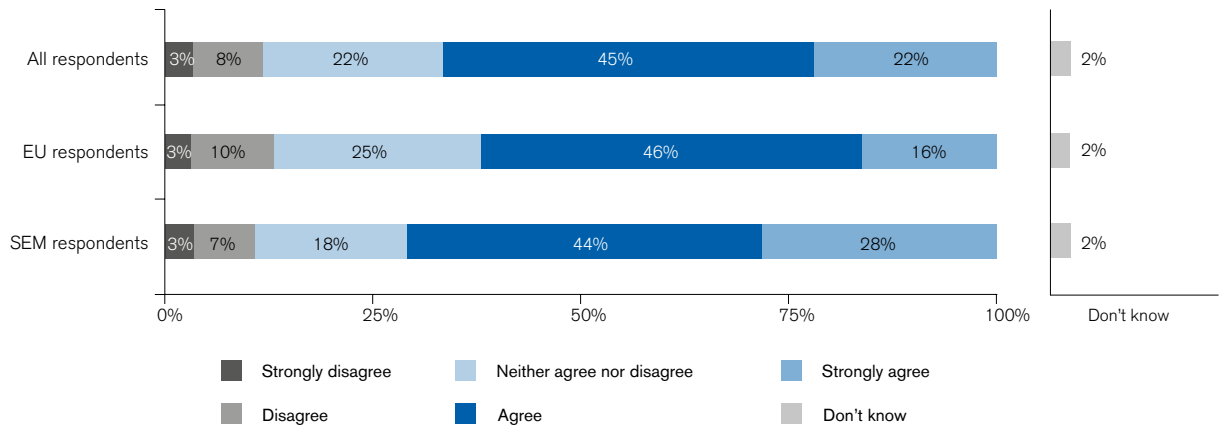
It confirms the paranoia of the ruling elites that civil society is not a bottom-up, grassroots movement but rather something financed by foreign powers, the "enemies of the state".

Polish respondent

HOW THE EU ENGAGES WITH CIVIL SOCIETY IN SEM COUNTRIES

Question 14 opened a series of four questions on the specific role of the EU vis-à-vis civil society in SEM countries. This question surveyed the respondents on their overall perception of this role. Results are very positive overall and respondents from SEM countries are even more positive than their European counterparts. 71% of the former and 62% of the latter either agree or strongly agree with the positive role played by the EU in regards to civil society. Only 11% of respondents do not agree that the EU plays a positive role.

Graph 27: Do you agree that the European Union is playing a positive role in relation with civil society in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries?

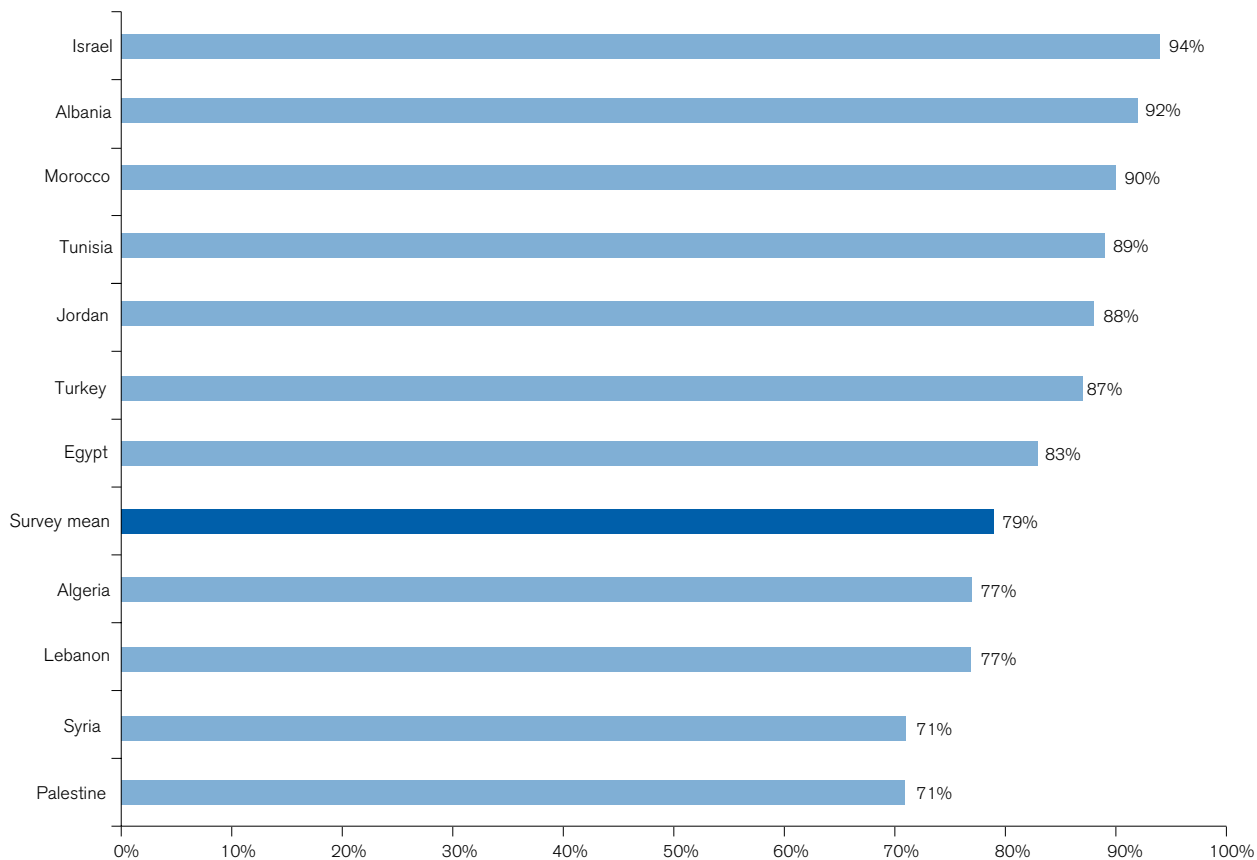


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

When it comes to specific countries, Israel and Albania (which, as a candidate country, is a particular case in this list) are the most positive regarding the EU role in relation with civil society, followed by Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan. Respondents from SEM countries torn by conflicts (Syria and Palestine) are less positive regarding the role of the EU.

Graph 28: Do you agree that the European Union is playing a positive role in relation with civil society in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries?

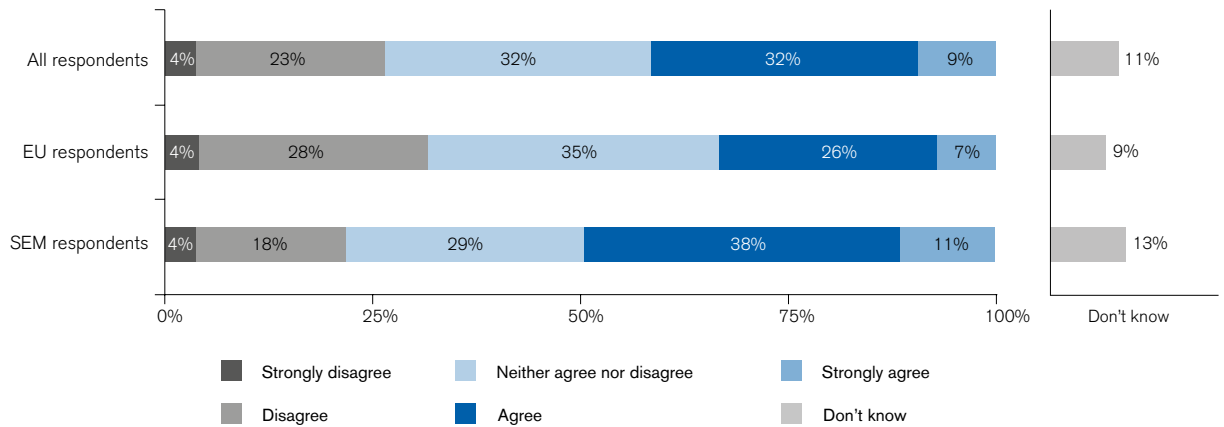
(% of agree and strongly agree answers) respondents from:



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

Question 15 shows the extent to which respondents agreed with the statement that the EU did “more to support civil society” since it committed to do so with the review of the ENP in 2015. Generally, respondents tend to agree more than disagree with this statement, although EU responses are less straightforward than SEM responses.

Graph 29: In line with the EU's 2012 Communication on civil society, the European Neighbourhood Policy reviewed in 2015 announced that the EU would “do more to support civil society” in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries. Do you agree that this has been the case?



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

While the aforementioned results show a rather positive picture regarding the assessment of the EU's role vis-à-vis civil society, critical statements prevail in the open comments that some respondents added:

The era of post-revolutions and uprisings in the Arab World has been marked with substantial withdrawal of EU effective policy pressure and engagement with Arab governments on critical matters like freedom of assembly, association and expression – core ingredients of thriving civic space.

Jordanian respondent

Unwillingness of the EU to alienate authoritarian regimes/move away from transformation paradigm to stability paradigm.

German respondent

The sensitive circumstances after 2011 in the southern countries require a new approach in civil society support and the EU is not implementing the programmes flexibly enough to adapt to the current demands and transformation needs of the SEM societies.

Spanish respondent

The EU projects an image of weakness and political impotence in SEM countries. Despite encouraging civil society in SEM countries, the EU is unable/unwilling to pressure governments of SEM countries to guarantee freedom of action for civil society organisations.

Italian respondent

Criminalisation of solidarity is quite strong both in the EU and in neighbouring countries. Most of the funding available is for providing the services, not for advocacy and watchdog activities.

Croatian respondent

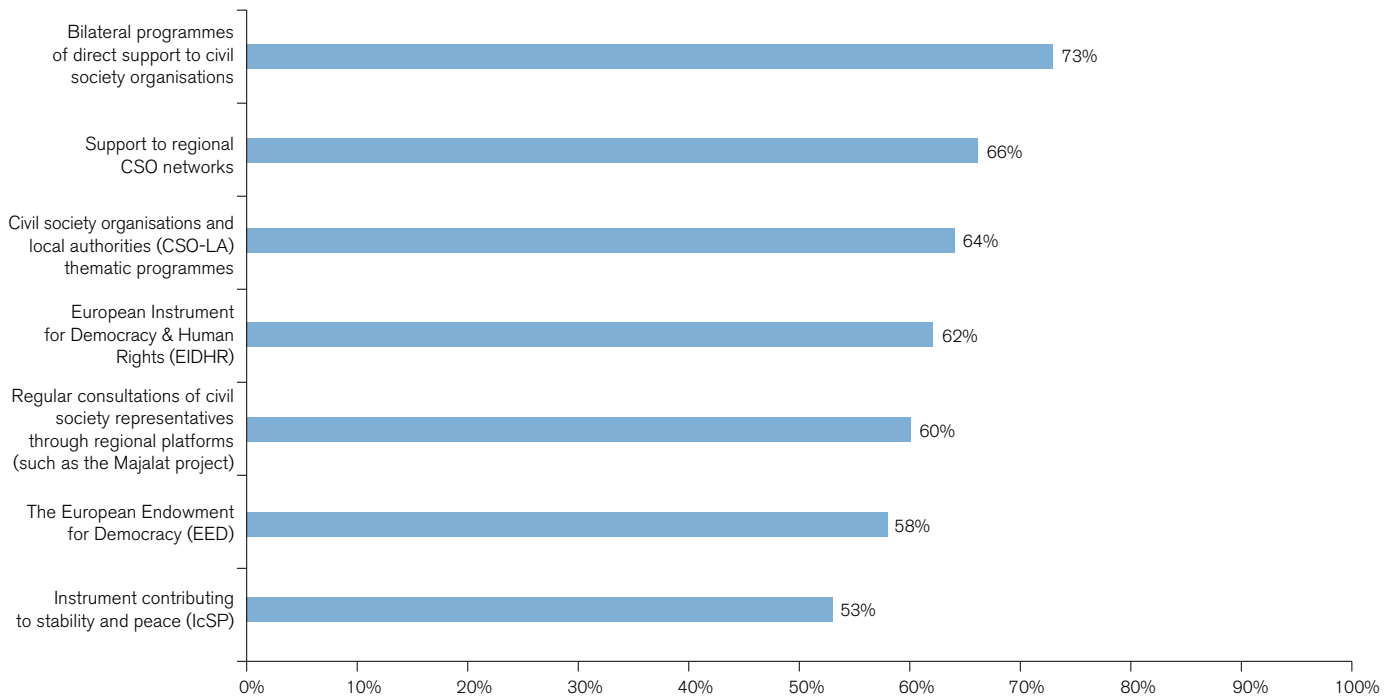
La seconde révision de 2015 a consisté, rappelons-le, à hiérarchiser les objectifs de la PEV dans le contexte des mouvements massifs des réfugiés et d'une série d'attaques terroristes visant l'Europe et les régions voisines ; ainsi, le triptyque économie, valeurs, sécurité, a été conservé, la priorité étant cependant accordée au volet sécuritaire.

Tunisian respondent

Question 16 was designed to assess the existing EU frameworks and channels in place to support civil society in SEM countries. Overall, respondents assess all instruments positively. Respondents assess bilateral programmes of direct support to civil society organisations as the most significant.

Graph 30: The EU uses the following frameworks in order to support civil society in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries. Do you agree that they represent a significant contribution?

(% of agree and strongly agree answers)



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

Open comments show that, while respondents tend to have a positive opinion of these instruments, they also consider that they are not widely publicised and mainly addressed to the state rather than CSOs themselves.

Plusieurs instruments ne sont pas assez médiatisés, en plus du manque d'accès aux plateformes de ces instruments. À cela s'ajoute le handicap de la langue et/ou de la formation des acteurs pour y accéder.

Moroccan respondent

The EU should make sure that governments' pressures do not interfere with these programmes and that support is not being given to government-dependent organisations.

Belgian respondent

The support helped in creating a sector of rich people from their projects without any proper monitoring or coaching.

Palestinian respondent

Ces programmes et instruments gagneraient à intégrer de plus en plus d'instruments destinés à financer des micro-projets de développement socio-économique en faveur des catégories fragiles ou fragilisées. Dans le contexte d'une démocratie naissante comme en Tunisie, cette démarche pourrait être entamée en coordination avec les autorités nationales, régionales et locales, afin d'en assurer la cohérence avec la stratégie nationale de développement.

Tunisian respondent

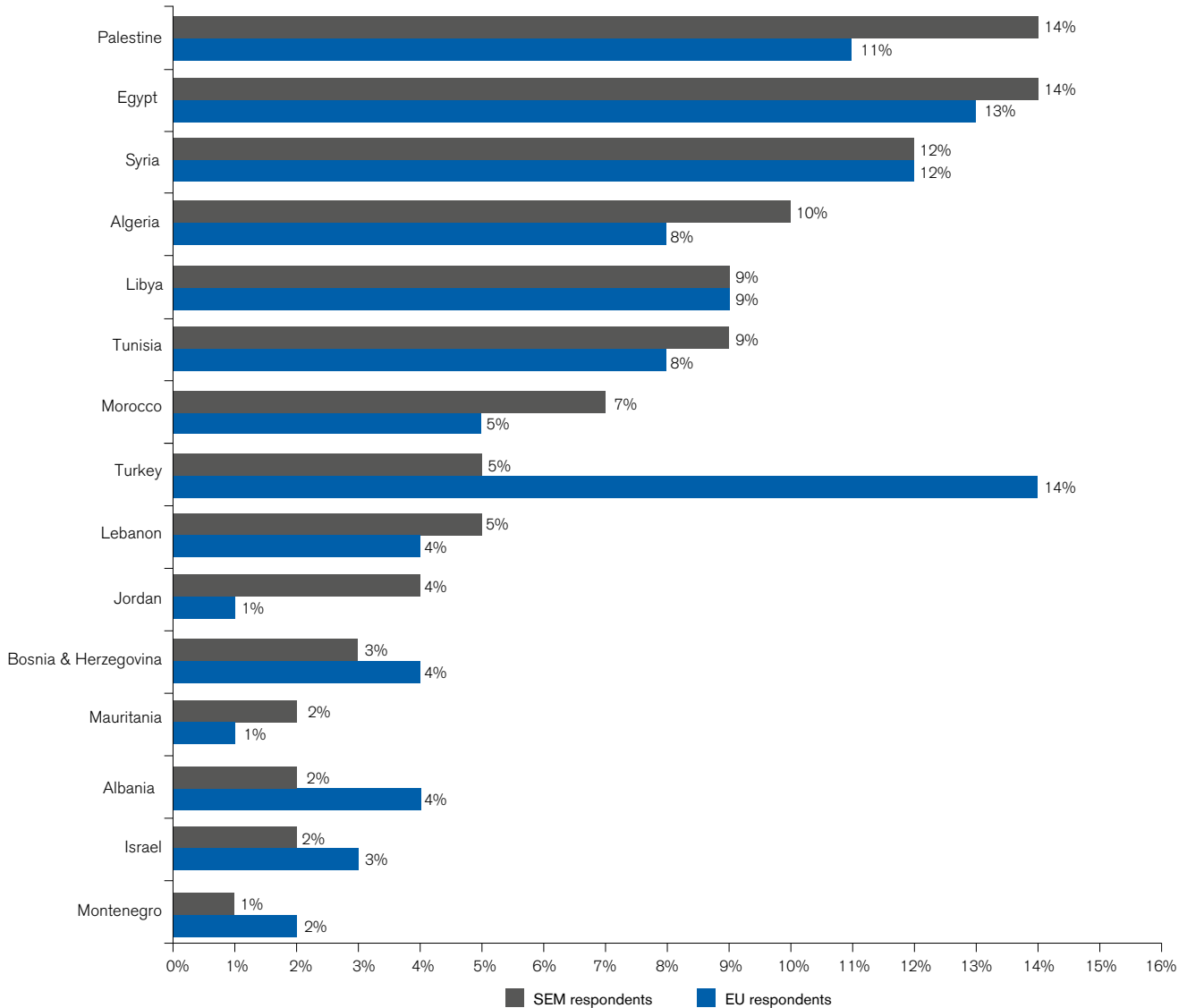
The CSO-LA could be more widely practised. Not all local authority partners have the same levels of awareness of the goals and effective measures as CSOs have. The scope of Majalat project's outreach could be wide and sustainable enough, and with the provision of adequate levels of accessibility and participation skills for CSOs.

UK respondent

Lastly, **Question 17** turned to the issue of the geographic scope of EU support to civil society, by asking respondents which countries the EU should prioritise when engaging with civil society. A general tendency is that respondents from SEM countries consider that their own country should be the EU's priority. The exception is Israeli respondents, who consider Turkey as the main priority.

Overall, the three countries that were most often mentioned by all respondents were Egypt, Palestine and Syria. The most common priority identified by European respondents was Turkey.

Graph 31: In terms of engagement with civil society, which countries should the EU prioritise?
 (respondents were asked to choose 3 options out of 15)



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

Tunisia is a fledgling democracy and should be supported. If there had been more EU support for Egyptian civil society, we wouldn't have been where we are today.

Egyptian respondent

Israel and Turkey have been moving in political directions opposed to what I think should be core EU values; Tunisia has a high share of young people wanting to emigrate. There are urgent issues to be addressed in all other countries, too, however.

German respondent

On the path towards the potential accession of the Balkan states, it is important to reinforce civil society. The others are important as well, but proximity and the current context matter.

Luxembourgish respondent

Il faut soutenir plus fortement la Tunisie pour l'aider à réussir à compléter sa transition démocratique. Le soutien européen actuel est insuffisant au vu de la situation économique inquiétante de la Tunisie. Seul un soutien plus massif et une coopération basée sur le co-développement et une intégration économique plus équitable peuvent contribuer à soutenir la transition démocratique et un développement plus inclusif et durable qui garantit la stabilité et la cohésion du pays et de la région.

Tunisian respondent