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European Values:

Socializing Eastern Partnership through Civil Society

How it all started:

The birth of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 was the EU's attempt to remedy its previous geopolitical shortsightedness and to make a vital distinction between its neighbors and its *European* neighbors. The non-European neighbors on the south were grouped into the »southern neighborhood« while the eastern group – formally called the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative – incorporated six former Soviet republics from Eastern Europe: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The ultimate goal for both groups remained the same - creating a »ring of friends« on newly established EU frontiers. Yet, for those countries additionally also carrying a »European« label, the expectations were much higher. Hope that the six would follow the footsteps of the central European countries and gladly take in the core European values was permeating the festive Prague summit in 2009.

From the outset, the Eastern Partnership put forward an attractive package of incentives to woo the six EaP states into a strenuous road of economic and political transformation. In the EU's well-elaborated toolkit designed to persuade and even coerce the partners into commitment, the Association Agreement - a centerpiece of the partnership - was envisaged to have the strongest gravity. Furthermore, first, a visa-facilitation and later, full visa-free regimes were also pledged in exchange for substantial efforts from the six Eastern European states.

The EU's two approaches:

As there is no free lunch in the market economy, the EU's generosity too comes with a fine print and list of caveats. Along with the socialization of domestic stakeholders of the neighbors, the most prominent and successfully tested framework the EU put forward to interact with her eastern neighbors is *Political Conditionality* inspired by rationalist thinking and a *tit for tat* logic. The EU provides states (their governments and other veto player actors) with external incentives tied with certain conditional demands while the respective states, by scrutinizing the lucrateness of the deal, decide to comply or opt-out.

Often contrasted with conditionality and its rationalist mindset is the mechanisms of socialization and persuasion that envisage pressuring domestic actors of a target country into ac-

cepting norms due to their inherent worth rather than their material benefits.¹ Therefore, the targeted actors are guided not so much by mercantilist gains, but by socially accepted behavior to »do the right thing«² Civil Sector is particularly perceptible to such an approach as they act as agents diffusing European norms in the partner countries.

Association Agreements and Civil Society:

During the progression of the EaP, the discrepancies between some members and their aspirations became more pronounced - culminating in 2013-2014, at the fifth anniversary of the Partnership. Only three countries - Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine chose to upgrade their relationship with the EU and signed the coveted association agreements. These agreements, besides many promises of free trade and extensive support, came with even more expectations and conditions. The Association Agreements underline the common interests the EU and the three partner countries share: »development of civil society, good governance, [...] enhanced economic cooperation, ...«. With this in mind, the Joint Civil Society Dialogue Forums were envisaged that were to bring together the civil societies of the EU and the EaP countries.

Civil society organizations, mentioned several dozens of times in each association agreement, are seen as a cornerstone of every endeavor be it state reforms or cultural exchanges. Creating convergence between civil organizations in the EU and their counterparts in Eastern Europe is encouraged as through this process, not only are the links strengthened but the spillover of the core European norms and practices take place that then are eagerly diffused domestically. This follows the pattern of the socialization approach that the EU applies tacitly along with the more prominent conditionality principle.

The convergence and cooperation between the EU's and partner countries' civil sectors imply already having an established civil sector landscape which is not always the case. For this reason, the EU, from the outset of the partnership, actively advocated the institution-building and development of civil society organizations through mutual agreements and projects. Civil Society Platforms and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum were established to facilitate exchanging views and maximizing convergence.

Following the »more for more« principle, the EU encouraged good behavior and commitment towards mutual principles among the Eastern Partnership countries. Consequently, the EU's financial support for the three associated countries grew steadily. A significant part of this financing was utilized to strengthen civil sector which resulted in vibrant civil society in three associated countries. Meanwhile, in the rest of the Eastern partnership, with the exception of Armenia, civil sector was gradually weeded out by ever-increasing authoritarian regimes.

¹ Sedelmeier, U. (2006)

² Börzel, Tanja A. (2003)

Current developments and gazing into the future:

Despite the EU's efforts to democratize the region, partially through creating a strong civil sector, disseminating European norms didn't go as smoothly as the EU hoped at the outset of the partnership. Democratization gains in the associated countries, quantitatively measures by the Freedom House, were modest with occasional setbacks and clear stagnation in the last years. Meanwhile, the non-associated members of the partnership – Azerbaijan and Belarus continued the downward trend towards autocracy which culminated with Lukashenka's cruel crackdown on democratic movement and Aliyev's 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war.

Armenia represents an interesting example of a non-associated country that managed to start a significant transformation after the 2018 revolution, make democratic gains comparable to the EU's associated neighbors, and create space for active civil society. All this, without having signed the association agreement and having access to all the benefits it brings for building civil society. This success could have also contributed to president Pashinyan's demise as robust democratization efforts, without strong international support are doomed to snap under the weight of the region's complex geopolitics.

Lastly, as the democratic protests in Belarus demonstrate, civil sector can spontaneously sprout even in the most ruthless circumstances. Despite Lukashenko's decades-long efforts to suppress all civil initiatives promoting freedom and democracy, in the matter of several weeks, countless civil movements were born after the 2020 stolen presidential elections. These vibrant movements were the result of their own, grass-roots initiative and far from being engineered by the EU. This example demonstrates how unpredictable the results of the EU's efforts in the region can be.

Assessing the past 10 years of the Eastern Partnership and gazing into the future, beyond 2020, the EU managed to make useful conclusions and switched to promoting a more pragmatic policy that envisages building a »more resilient« region. In this new strategy too, civil sector remains indispensable in promoting and protecting democracy.

Author

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