



**Some thoughts:  
Civil society <-> Democracy <-> Civil society  
organizations (NGOs)**

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### Civil society <-> Democracy <-> Civil society organizations (NGOs)

**What is „civil society“?**

The term "civil society" is one of the many "EU concepts" that are used frequently, but are rarely understood in their complexity. Interpretations vary, so mutual and detailed understanding is seldom possible. Such terms are mostly based on Western European traditions and can be traced back to local experiences and developments there. In transitioning countries with a rather totalitarian past, they are rarely included as part of the political debate: Here it is a foreign word. Foreign words are readily used to a certain extent also for helping to conceal or disguise things. Or even just to please some EU-experts. This happens sometimes with the term "civil society".

**Not more and not less than all citizens!**

First of all, you might think that "civil society" refers to those ununiformed individuals who are in no way associated with the state or its institutions. It is suggested that people with uniforms look alike or even think alike or have to complete the same tasks. The "non-uniformed" agents could be seen as individuals who are independent and think and act freely. Certainly this sounds all a little too simplistic, but it also helps to understand.

**Citizens in a democracy...**

In formerly totalitarian states - if we look at it from this way – the "non-uniformed" were hardly tolerated. Therefore, it often seems as if it was the opposite of a "uniformed society" – here the "civil society" is unknown and barely present in conversation or thoughts. One could often communicate better if one would just say "citizens".

**... have the right but also the duty to actively participate**

Before continuing with the search for tasks and functions of the citizens, one should keep in mind some baselines of the term "democracy". In Wikipedia it is stated (here shortened) as follows: "Democracy (from ancient Greek "rule of the commoners"), refers to forms of government, political orders or systems in which power and government are by the people - either directly or through selection of decision-making representatives (i.e. including parliamentarians, City-Council-representatives etc.) – that are involved in all binding collective decisions. Typical characteristics of a democracy are free elections, majority rule, acceptance of a political opposition, constitutionality, protection of fundamental rights, protection of civil liberties and respect for human rights. Since the power is exercised by the public, freedom of press and freedom of opinion are essential in the process of political decision-making. Power and government emanates from the people, that is by the citizens. This universality has freedom of expression and should be used for political decision-making.

**Effective interaction between citizens and government needs...**

It becomes clear that the general public must not be passive; it actually should rather be active! Citizens should be actively involved in shaping political opinion. Seen in a different light, one could indicate a significant difference between totalitarian or authoritarian states and democracy: For a democracy to function, the interaction of citizens with the representatives of their choice is an absolute requirement.

**... Dialogue and willingness to compromise**

In a pluralistic democracy citizens have very different interests, goals and desires. Some of these interests are even diametrically opposed to each other. For example, city dwellers want fast highways through the country, while farmers are often against it. Or young people want youth centers, while older people would prefer retirement homes or meeting places. Often, however, there are also similarities for the wide variety of interests - if not at first sight then at least when sitting together and trying to exclude contradictions and trying to find similarities.

This happens conventionally, for example, during wage negotiations between employers and employees. Employers want to pay as little as possible and want their employees to work as long as possible. On the other hand, employees want the opposite: less work and higher wages. How can an agreement be reached in such a scenario? This is only possible if both sides try to reach a compromise, that is, they no longer want to assert their requirements, but instead are willing to find a mutually beneficial outcome.

This can - as mentioned - only work if both sides move. An agreement will probably contain only 50-60% of the respective claims of both negotiating parties, but it would still be a **good compromise**, as both would make a profit out of it. On the other hand,

**Combine individual goals and desires...**

**...form groups with all those who have similar or common interests**

**The diversity of interest groups reflects a...**

**...a pluralistic and democratic society**

**Good volunteer work needs money and professional structures**

**Money, yes – but no political dependencies!**

no one has lost and no one is the ultimate winner! The willingness to such negotiations, in the EU-jargon is called **dialogue**, while **participation** refers to the ability to achieve common compromise and is a prerequisite for the democratic participation of citizens in policy-making.

It is obvious that not every individual can negotiate with each individual. There are several reasons for this. First of all, there would be only a compromise between two persons - with no significance for everyone else - second of all, each one lacks assertiveness with negotiators. There is evidence also for this: if only 30 people demonstrate against something, likely no one would care about it. But if there are tens of thousands, such as during the demonstrations against the inclusion of Syrian chemical weapons, anything can be accomplished. In this case, the government was so harassed that they had to cancel the plans for holding the weapons.

When so many single **individuals** can agree on a **common goal**, they develop a degree of power that allows them to have a significant influence on political discussion. In case of disputes about chemical weapons the common goal was to prevent its inclusion. When this could be asserted, the common goal was reached. Many other interests need longer, particularly when it is not about the rejection of a political decision, but rather the creation of something new. That is the commonality of all those who have similar interests, last much longer and therefore needs to be well organized. A good example for this would be the protection of the environment. Many people want to protect natural areas and prevent nature from further destruction. This cannot be achieved through a large demonstration alone, but also needs a lot of time - and thus, as an individual in an organization, more willingness to actively participate in the long term is ideal. Furthermore, not only demonstrations, but also negotiations, persuasion etc. in schools or in the public sphere, or even lobbying in city councils or in the Parliament. It requires **interest groups** of citizens - in the EU jargon they are referred to as "Civil Society organizations" or NGOs (non-governmental organizations).

As already previously mentioned, the variety of different interest groups in a country can be very large. In the EU countries and beyond there are thousands of interest groups - big ones for far-reaching objectives, such as World Wildlife Fund (WWF), or Amnesty International, or smaller ones for specific interests and which do not bind so many people, such as for instance an association for stamp collectors. The **range** of interest groups is as **wide** and diverse as the people in a country. There are, however, differences in the way in which interest groups operate and produce outcomes. Some organizations rather prefer to have little influence on political decisions, but instead bring together people with similar interests (for example stamp collectors). Others work in the social field and want to help other people around them (assistance for disabled or socially disadvantaged people etc.) while others want to primarily implement their goals in politics, since they have no other alternative (for example environmental groups) because often political decisions or laws are required, in order to change things.

However all deserve support - through active participation and financial contributions. Democratic states that estimate the value of interest groups as very high, provide them with funds from the state budget (public money) - without any condition related to the content or political orientation.

All interest groups have something in common. They were always founded and designed by volunteers - therefore, they do not have a private income. Only larger organizations managed to have over time their own money sources. This mostly because they asked their members (on the Statute), to pay regular contributions. Thus, a separate budget for the work of interest groups could be created that secures both their **independence** and their professionalization. Because with this money not only are campaigns financed but also a professional administration as well as the required experts. In almost all countries there is also some public funding in support of the interest groups. But in most transition countries these funds are very scarce and, furthermore, are often targeted by the respective governments, which means they are not always fairly distributed.

Then, nevertheless, the **dependence of interest groups** on other donors is a key issue and is going to remain a major problem for a long time because the struggle for support funds by donor organizations etc. often outweighs the actual target of interest groups, namely their unity/unanimity in the matter. In fact it happens that interest groups for instance in the youth field compete with each other rather than cooperating since many groups are mostly concerned in taking away the money of other

## Civil society and civil society groups - still a difficult relationship

## The distrust towards „PONGOs“ and „GONGOs“ is justified

## Expertise is required

...

## ... when it comes to technical/specific issues in politics

"competitors" from donor organizations and to put the interests of their donors above the ones of their members. The fact is that not quite a few [quite a few - several - or very few - not many] donor organizations have their own interests, which do not necessarily coincide with those of the interest groups or their members. Thus, in addition to the financial **dependence** of an interest group, issues of **substantive or even political** independence also arise. If so, this group **no** longer meets the **criteria for** actually being an **interest group** which has developed from the population.

In almost all transition countries there is a part of the population - i.e. civil society - that has certain **mistrust** towards "civil society organizations" or "interest groups". Or at least, many do not really feel represented by these groups.

There are very different reasons for this, which lie in the differing goals and functioning of the interest groups. Sometimes they are unable to make their concerns **understandable** enough to the people, often because they do not address themselves to the population at all (often through think tanks). It also happens that the interest groups attempt too little to "get more people into the boat", because this could make things **more complicated, but certainly also more successful!**

There are also **other reasons** for this distrust - and they are **alarming!** Since it became clear to parties and governments in countries of transition that the involvement of civil society and its groups can be considered as the "EU 101", they have stopped rejecting the NGOs and have even started establishing new ones or making existing ones as their own. These groups are though **no non-governmental organizations** - i.e. NGOs - but would be rather considered as "**PONGOs**" - party-oriented NGOs or "**GONGOs**" - government-oriented NGOs.

These kinds of organizations usually have more money and, obviously, more influence in politics since the latter has somehow created them as **claqueurs** themselves.

This remains of course no mystery for the population. Unfortunately, these "non-NGOs" ensure growing and extensive mistrust of the people towards all interest groups - including towards those who really want to work independently.

Besides the fact that there are many different interests within a population that should be represented in political decision-making, there is certainly no doubt that a major reason (or even benefit) for interest groups is that they have a greater knowledge in **their working field** and are even **more competent** than most politicians. After all, politicians cannot know everything (and they should not act as if they do), therefore, they often depend on the expertise of interest groups for advice. This can be regarded as a second major reason for the **absolute necessity of interest groups** in democracy: The wish to make the best possible decisions!

So, for example, when it comes to the agricultural framework, it should be obvious for the policy to select those that **know the most**, those who create and work there - ie, their **interest group**.

Who should be better informed about the needs and problems that young people are facing if not themselves? Therefore, when it comes to the framework and content of education and job perspectives, young people must have a **contributive voice**. Of course this would include also teachers' associations and business organizations - employers and employees.

There would be a variety of examples that make clear how much the competence of **interest groups** is **essential** in taking **good policy decisions**. But in this area, interest

*Examples: goals and working methods of civil society groups, organizations or institutions.*

- **Think Tanks** (Experts who work on specific topics and (should) make their expertise available.)
- **Employers' organizations** (employers and/or representatives of particular sectors of the economy) who want for instance to influence the economic policy
- **Trade unions** (employees in the different economic sectors) who want to influence the wage and social policy)
- **Groups** wishing to have a **selective influence** on political decisions (for example environment, human rights, consumer protection, etc.)
- **Social-oriented groups** that usually limit themselves in helping needy people (often because state support is not enough)
- **Minority groups** who work for equal treatment of minorities among the population (for example Roma people)

**But all should have as a priority: With their work and results they must primarily serve the population or parts of it.**

groups should try to gain more **expertise**. That is, for example, to not only refuse **proposals** but to **develop better ones** in order to be successful in the long term. For sure not all proposals and requirements of interest groups can be translated one-to-one into policy decisions because often there are other **interests of other groups** that **need to be considered** by the policy. Or does it simply lack the financial resources to implement everything?

There are thus many reasons why interest groups, as well as politicians should be able to **take part in dialogue and have willingness to compromise**.

Now let us go back to the starting point of civil society - to the citizens. Civil society organizations can only obtain or maintain their **credibility** and **authority** if the **commitment** to it originates directly **from the citizens** themselves. In totalitarian states an independent and self-confident commitment of citizens was rather hated and persecuted. Now - after the transition to democracy - citizens should do the opposite of what they have done previously. This is not easy and must be learned. However, it is still absolutely necessary in order to actually **bring democracy to life**. If democracy is largely nurtured and developed from outside only (through experts, consultants or even political pressure from other countries) it has nearly no chance of long-term survival. There are unfortunately already too many examples. **Top-down democracies** remain mostly **thin facades** while **bottom-up democracies** assure a more **sustainable** development.

In other words, **the more citizens** actively and autonomously invest in the development of their country, the better a **comprehensive democratization** can be established. And here it must be emphasized once again that democracy differs from totalitarian systems in this essential way: Civil society has the **duty** to express their interests and work for it! Democracy is a "political" work for each and every individual. Totalitarianism on the other hand requires the silent, patient citizen who accepts what is to given him/her, otherwise he/she remains silent. Who carries on this behavior in a democracy will soon realize that he/she may even receive less than in totalitarian regimes. This is what many citizens in transition countries already think to have learned/understood! **Democracy is anything but a self-service shop without cash desk at the end!** Democracy is "give and take" and no paradise, no Garden of Eden or El Dorado, where one only receives.

The citizen who wants **democracy** must be **actively committed!** This applies to all levels - including the personal development one is largely responsible for in a democracy (in a real democracy high posts are not appointed, the despot does not determine the lives of entire families, people no longer wait for "alms from above", etc.). A **socially established democracy** ensures that the appropriate conditions for this kind of self-commitment - as **free education, a descent provision of basic services to the citizens, free choice of occupation, free formation of opinion etc.** - are give. This only works with the active support of civil society, which must enable the democratic state to create such conditions. **Those who idly permit** these basic pillars of democracy not to be created or even dismantle them again, are or **remain a (passive) part of rather authoritarian aligned state forms** or make these possible again. Once again, there are some alarming examples in transitioning countries.

In many debates, unfortunately, it can be heard over and over again that citizens are afraid to express their opinions loudly or, even more, are for example forced to go to the streets and demonstrate for their rights. First of all, many older citizens must have had a lot of bad experiences in totalitarian regimes and had to learn to be silent the hard way. Younger ones, who never had to live in totalitarian regimes are somehow forced to behave adequately according to their parents, remain silent, wait for better times, or even leave the country. Younger ones fear even the "guilt by association" as it existed earlier: "If I say something, my father could lose his job." There are examples that prove this!

If so, it is really frightening. But it would not be right to leave it at that! The individuals are afraid and scarcely have the opportunity to defend themselves. If, however, they do find others that are in a similar situation, they become stronger and their fear becomes smaller. Even the saying goes "a problem shared is a problem halved". Therefore, when many with **similar problems** come together in the form of **interest groups** and work to enable changes or improvements, **they reduce their individual fear** and increase simultaneously a shared opportunity to really change something. We have been able to notice that many, if they have a common goal, can bring about change (as for example in the case of the Syrian chemical weapons). And no one has been

**Civic participation is the answer of democracy to totalitarian systems.**

**But law is also mandatory in democracy: ...**

**...and the democratic state must support participation**

**Democracy requires personal commitment...**

**... but it must create the space for it!**

**The possibility of the involvement of civil society in political decision-making...**

**...is an expression of the ability of a state and its supporting parties to be democratic**

**„It takes two to Tango”**

"punished"! That is why it is so important that the citizens **share** their **interests** and that the **interest groups** get together more directly **with the citizens**: „**Bring them on board**" and give them the confidence so that they are able to feel comfortable as individuals in a group.

**Politicians** who are committed to democracy do know that they are only provisionally "**hired**" for their **job** by the citizens. They have to justify the trust placed in them, that they have received during the elections and, therefore especially after them!

**Democratically-minded politicians** will **welcome** and support such developments by including and supporting a **more confident civil society**. They know and support the diversity of civil society and their different needs. Because they do **not** want a "**uniformed**" and dead society (with rule or with consistent suppression) with everyone thinking and feeling the same way. They want a **great diversity** in their country - even if it is often quite difficult to implement a balance for all the various interests in daily politics.

In other words: As long as politicians or the "politics" of civil society are regarded as something of another species, a feeling of oppression and injustice will remain. But if **civil society** sees itself as a **vital part of the policy** of a country, there are **more opportunities of balancing the needs** of a **more cohesive society** with **better perspectives** for all, not just for a few.

In order to achieve a **fruitful and democratic dialogue** between **civil society and politics**, the **shaping and participation** for independent civil society organizations should **actively be set**. In the EU this is referred to as "participation". In short, if political decisions have to be taken - something that happens almost every day - then there must be **established and institutionalized ways** for this required contribution. If there are social issues, sociopolitical interest groups must be heard and their arguments should be considered before taking decisions. When it comes to sports, relevant professional associations should be included, as well as at least teachers and youth organizations must be involved in decisions that have to do with education, training and living conditions of young people. There is no area of policy in a country where there are no specific interests of citizens.

Despite the **variety of the civil society**, there should be a **common goal**: Citizens and their independent interest groups are **accepted** as **part of the policy-making** - they actually have to if democracy has to mean something good!

Policy can not be held solely responsible for possible injustices. Politicians, parties or governments that allow this form of politics also bear responsibility.

And it requires **both sides**: **politicians** have to justify the confidence of **citizens**, and the latter on the other hand are actively operating for their interests. Only with both sides it will be possible to work for **more social justice**, more **democratic freedoms** and a **better future**.

