

EUROPEAN  
NETWORK  
OF POLITICAL  
FOUNDATIONS

E N O P



INDEPENDENT ACTORS IN DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Supporting political parties  
for democracy  
– food for thought  
for European actors

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

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## Executive Summary

Political parties are the backbone of any democracy. Nevertheless, the European Union's (EU) support to political parties in the field of democracy assistance is lacking a rigorous approach. The European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP) underlines that support for political parties in third countries is an essential element of democracy support. This paper argues that political pluralism can only be fostered by going beyond the classical areas of donor engagement such as election support, good governance, human rights and the rule of law.

Three typical approaches in support of political parties will be outlined: the multi-party dialogue, the all-party technical assistance approach, and the peer-to-peer programmatic party development assistance. The multi- and all-party approaches provide a sense of neutrality to party assistance but may suffer in terms of legitimacy, when the international yardsticks of political and civil rights are not respected by a participating party. On a programmatic and organisational level, the peer-to-peer approach develops stronger and more relevant political parties. It includes capacity-building for political negotiations as well as dialogue and coalition-building to effectively contribute to a more functional political party system.

Politically affiliated foundations provide an opportunity to build the plurality of qualified political alternatives, which are essential in a democracy. The political foundations in EU member states have performed this function for decades and possess experiences, methods, skills and operational platforms for the EU and the member states to make use of.

## Introduction

The less an EU partner country is willing to uphold democratic standards and principles within its national context, the less receptive it will be to cooperate with the EU in the areas of democracy and governance. Autocratic regimes may accept public sector reform packages, but they will not favour contributions to political pluralism and democratic aspirations of their peoples. Quite often support to key independent institutions in a democracy, such as free media, independent trade unions, human rights advocacy organisations and opposed political parties, is not tolerated.

The EU institutions and the EU member states have taken a clear stance on democracy. The EU can and does engage in support of democratisation processes. The EU institutions and the member states include objectives for good governance and human rights in their bilateral agreements with partner governments. Furthermore, beyond their cooperation with governments, the EU institutions and member states' development cooperation agencies collaborate directly with civil society organisations, to develop democratic practices and enhance a democratic culture.

Through this paper, ENoP seeks to encourage the EU to further elaborate political party support as an indisputable issue in the EU's comprehensive democracy support agenda.

The paper emphasises the crucial function of political parties in fostering national democratic processes in EU partner countries and it emphasizes that the work of political foundations in support of democracy is both legitimate and strategic. Based on its active contribution to a number of fundamental EU policy consultations, ENoP has gained widespread acknowledgement as an important agent in the field of democracy support within the EU community. ENoP unites 70 member foundations belonging to six party families. As varied as the mandates and fields of work of the ENoP members are, they share being accountable to their respective governments, -either directly to the Ministries or through a specialised agency.<sup>1</sup> However, it is usually left to the foundations to decide on their thematic activities or the countries in which to operate.

Over decades, ENoP members have gained a vast experience in offering support to political parties, in order to promote sustainable

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<sup>1</sup> While in Sweden, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) is directly responsible for approving programmes and disbursing the funding allocated by the government; in the Netherlands, the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD), founded by seven political parties, is mainly funded by the Dutch Ministry for Foreign Affairs. In Germany, the political foundations' parties receive 95% of their funding from the German government.

## Key Principles

democracy by fostering political pluralism. Their main activities comprise training seminars to upcoming leaders, study visits and experience exchange as well as drafting manuals, trainings in campaigning and internal party management.

Given the bridging role of political foundations between the political arena and the civil society sector, ENoP members are in a key position to contribute to the policy discussion on EU political party support. The underlying assumption of this paper is that democracy support can only be sustainable by providing assistance to both sectors (civil society and political parties) and by fully integrating political parties, as a target group, in the EU's conceptual approach.

Despite the fact that EU assistance to political parties is comprised in the EU's strategic approach for democratisation processes, currently the kind of support the EU offers, does not adequately reflect the importance of political parties for the establishment of representative democracies. The present paper would like to make a contribution to the current stream of reassessing EU policies concerning external support for democracy, including its engagement with political parties and outlines some recommendations to the EU and other stakeholders involved in democracy support worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

Development cooperation has upheld local ownership and postulated political neutrality as key operational principles. When dealing with democracy support, local ownership and postulated political neutrality need to be redefined. Attempting impartiality between a non-democratic government and a democratic opposition is not neutral. Likewise, when promoting political pluralism, it is not for a government to be the sole driver in a transition process. It is for a broad spectrum of key actors in democracy building to agree on priorities and to foster democratic values.

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ening of the role of political actors and political parties in EU development and democracy policies. The network contributed inter alia to the topic within the framework of the event "EU Democracy Support and engagement with political parties" organised by EEAS and EC in September 2012, as well as by organising panel discussions on "Moving beyond Electoral Democracies: Enhancing the capacities of political actors before, during and after the electoral process" during the European Development Days in Warsaw in 2011 and on "Moving beyond electoral democracies: Furthering level playing fields in the electoral process" during the World Forum for Democracy in October 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Since its establishment in 2006, ENoP has been advocating the strength-

## The missing link

Political pluralism is a key ingredient of any democracy. There is no democracy without an effective party system. Political parties are key institutions in a democracy but have rather been neglected in the EU external assistance. Well-functioning political parties provide coherent policy alternatives and priorities, they mobilize the electorate for different policy options, train future political leaders, provide candidates capable of assuming the responsibility of public decision making, and, above all, parties in opposition can hold the ruling government accountable.

## The institutional and policy framework

The Amsterdam Treaty, in force since the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1999, declared democracy and human rights as founding principles of the EU, also including in the mandate efforts to promote democracy in EU external relations. Today, the EU follows a broad but rather fragmented approach to democracy support, making use of the different instruments at hand: the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)<sup>3</sup>, the Instrument for

Stability (IfS), thematic programmes including Non-state Actors and Local Authorities in Development (NSA/LA). In the geographical instruments an emphasis is placed on good governance and the strengthening of the rule of law in partner countries. With the launch of the Civil Society Facility (CSF) in September 2011, the EU responded primarily to the manifest needs of civil society organisations, particularly in the European Neighbourhood South countries as agents for transition following the Arab Spring. In the European Neighbourhood East the 2009 initiative to create a Civil Society Forum by Commissioner Füle allowed a regular exchange between European NGOs and their Eastern counterparts. In this case, CSF funds strengthened the civil society sector in response to a continuously decreasing space for CSOs to influence policy making and to hold governments accountable.

In addition, the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) was launched in 2011 under the Polish EU Presidency and it will soon become operational. It is the result of a common initiative promoted by several EU Member States (and Switzerland) and the EU in the field of democracy support. Its main

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and Human Rights (EIDHR) in 2006 and expressly mentions political foundations as being eligible applicants for EIDHR funds, albeit not for activities with individual political partners. Few political foundations can make use of EIDHR support. Before 2011 assistance to political parties did not feature in the programming of the instrument and even now a multiparty approach has to be followed.

<sup>3</sup> The EIDHR of 1994 was renamed European Instrument for Democracy

purpose is to direct grants to pro-democratic activists and/or organisations struggling for democratic transition in the European neighbourhood and beyond. Given that political foundations have been working in European neighbouring countries for several decades and have brought a vast experience in working with political movements, upcoming political and civil society leaders as well as grassroots organisations; a fruitful cooperation with the EED can be envisaged. ENoP shares the needs assessment of providing flexible and non-bureaucratic support to grassroots organisations, activists and movements that favour strengthening the democratic development of their country.

On the policy level the Council had already under the Swedish Presidency in 2009 agreed to develop a new policy framework for Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations.<sup>4</sup> The Conclusions include the EU Agenda for Action on Democracy Support, which strongly recommends including political actors in democracy support activities on a long-term view: "EU democracy support should include a special focus on the role of elected representatives and political parties and institutions, independent media and civil society. The EU support should take into account the full electoral cycle and not

focus on ad hoc electoral support only."<sup>5</sup> In the context of the agenda, pilot countries were identified in order to measure the impact of EU assistance. EU policy has been further complemented with the Joint Communication, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2011, "A new response to a changing Neighbourhood"<sup>6</sup>.

Furthermore, the Agenda for Change<sup>7</sup>, which outlines a revised EU development policy, put renewed emphasis on the respect of democratic principles and human rights. In June 2012, the EU published the EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy<sup>8</sup>, which intends to streamline the EU's efforts in the fields of democracy support and human rights by setting out a concrete timeline and goals to be achieved.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood. A review of European Neighbourhood Policy. Joint Communication by the High Representative of The Union For Foreign Affairs And Security Policy and the European Commission, 25.05.2011.

<sup>7</sup> Increasing the impact of EU Development Policy: an Agenda for Change. Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 13.10.2011.

<sup>8</sup> Council of the European Union. EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, 25.06.2012.

<sup>9</sup> Further efforts in streamlining the EU's approach to democracy support was proven in a pilot exercise that took place in the course of 2011. New and revised working modalities in order to deepen the EU's ability to support democratic developments were explored. The aim was to develop a methodology to implement the Agenda for Action, see: Joint Report to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Implementation of the Agenda for Action on Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations, 11.10.2012, JOIN(2012) 28 final.

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<sup>4</sup> Council conclusions on Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations, Brussels, 17 November 2009.



## The operational environment and common donor approach

The common donor approach has so far mainly focused on three prominent entry points for democracy support: a) human rights and elections; b) good governance and transparency and c) rule of law and decentralisation.

Respect for human rights is a core element of any democracy. However, it is just one feature. Equally crucial are participation and competition, the necessary environments and structures allowing engagement in political decision-making processes as well as the possibility to present political alternatives.

All elements are intrinsically interlinked, but quite often we find an imbalanced approach within instruments such as the EIDHR.

Besides the emphasis on human rights, a strong focus has equally been placed on electoral support. Under the assumption that elections are an essential pillar for any democracy, electoral calendars have been pushed through in highly volatile and in some cases still conflicting environments.

The inherent effect of elections, that is to reinforce instabilities, quite often has not been remedied by counterbalancing initiatives. To

the contrary, the focus has either been on technical and neutral assistance to Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), or on voter education via local civil society and election observation missions.

Thus, the official Election Observation Missions have been the democratic component in the programming of the EIDHR for the financial period 2007-2013.

Lack of capacities and resources particularly on the side of opposition parties, regularly impede the existence of level playing fields.

High levels of mistrust amongst actors, lack of dialogue opportunities and limited access to key actors often provide a fertile ground for post-electoral instabilities and derailing electoral processes.

Although the electoral management cycle has received increased attention by donors, their engagement in the post-election phase with political actors, be it parliamentarians or representatives of political parties remains limited.

Hence, any valuable support to democratisation processes cannot be implemented by excluding interaction with political actors. However, there are some key challenges that need to be addressed when working with political parties in transition countries when it comes to

- a. a lack of institutionalisation, where parties center around political leaders and structures on ground seldom go beyond financial aid;
- b. a high level of fragmentation in the party system, which quite often forces the formation of volatile electoral alliances, or mainly affects opposition in those cases where one party has become predominant;
- c. a prevalent polarisation, which is not necessarily based on ideological grounds but has developed on regional, ethnical or religious cleavages
- d. political party and ideological commitment, as many politicians in transitional/ democratically challenged countries are often not bound by ideological conviction, but mostly by power and/or job opportunities.

## Supporting the development of political parties

Assistance to political parties is important. However, it is challenging to find acceptable and at the same time efficient delivery mechanisms. Three different types of party aid can be distinguished:

### 1. Facilitation of collective dialogue between political parties

Parties are invited to rounds of dialogue in order to discuss issues as common political challenges, or the rules, procedures and regulations for political parties. A major challenge of this approach is the definition of relevant selection criteria for parties to participate. One solution that is often applied is to include those parties represented in parliament. In countries where one party is predominant, this means that some of the most important political movements might not be included in the programme. The multi-party dialogue approach is championed, for example, by the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD), in a variety of bilateral or multilateral parliamentary support schemes and International IDEA. The Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD) and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) have mixed models, where funding is available both for multi-party work and for peer-to-peer party support.

### 2. Capacity-building for all parties by the same agency

This approach can be applied in two different ways – to all parties collectively or in the form of simultaneous but separate support to all parties. One agency provides opinion

polling, strategy consultants, campaign advisors etc. to all parties included in the programme. Often, the selection is done as in the dialogue programmes meaning that only well-established parties, preferably those holding seats in parliament, are invited. There are weak points embedded in this approach: A dominant party, often active in restricting the political space for its competitors, receives support just like any other party, in an even handed but not at all neutral setting. This can lead to disappointment and lack of confidence from other parties that are trying to reach out to voters and to win the election. The all-party capacity-building approach is partly deemed to be technical in its nature and deals with technical matters, organisational issues and electoral campaigning skills. Thus, the all-party consultant is unlikely to be able to facilitate the development of party values or ideological foundations. American party foundations like the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) are champions in the all-party approach.

The approach emphasizes consensus and cooperation as underlying values. However, it bears its limitations. In particular, it does not build the individual capacities of the participating parties to fulfill their functions in society and to develop policy alternatives.

### **3. The peer-to-peer approach to build political parties**

The peer-to-peer approach fills some of the gaps left open in multi-party approaches. Political party foundations, associated with well-established political parties in EU countries, engage in peer-to-peer cooperation. Such foundations or funds of a significant size exist for instance in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, France and Spain. In the UK and Norway the international offices of the established political parties directly receive funding for peer-party support.

The advantages of the peer-to-peer approach are based on the fact that the party foundation and the sister party share a common ideological platform which makes cooperation easier. Trust is hereby essential. A common ideological platform among partners makes it easier to set and agree on benchmarks to be achieved in cooperation, thereby reducing transaction costs. In principle, anti-democratic political parties do not benefit from support. Moving away from ad hoc technical assistance, peer-to-peer support establishes long-term relationships. The level of trust that develops over the years among the partners in the peer-to-peer approach makes it possible to discuss sensitive topics and to implement party policies and value based programmatic orientations.

There are several challenges in this approach. Parties with sound democratic credentials might be neglected due to the lack of an ideologically affiliated partner. Equally, the link between strengthening a particular party and strengthening or creating a multiparty system is not always given. Therefore, peer-to-peer programmes must include capacity tools also for coalition-building and establishing constructive opposition politics in order to generate a democratic political culture.

## Safeguarding an international legal framework

It is important to keep up with the principles of international law. Limitations on the interaction and cooperation of political parties at an inter-state level should not have place in national legislation. For instance, the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has clearly established in its Copenhagen Document that associations, including political parties, shall be able to communicate freely and co-operate with similar associations on an international level.<sup>10</sup> Open communication and relationship between parties at an inter-state level is further supported by the Council of Europe's Venice

Commission, which has stated that:

“The practice of international co-operation among parties sharing the same ideology is a widespread one. Some parties have projected further their international dimension by assisting sister parties in third countries. In the past, these practices assisted, for instance, the democratic consolidation in a number of European countries. Whenever this assistance is compatible with national legislation and in line with ECHR principles and European standards, it must be welcomed as a good practice, since it contributes to creating solid democratic party systems.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Copenhagen Document of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> European Commission for Democracy through law (Venice Commission): Code of good practices in the field of political parties, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 77th Plenary Session, Venice, 12-13 December 2008, p. 13.

## Recommendations

ENoP recommends the European Commission to consider the following:

1. Recognise the significance of political pluralism for democracies by broadening the scope of EU funding beyond classical areas of engagement (election support, good governance, human rights, and rule of law).
2. Enhance the EU funding for political party work as an essential element of democracy support.
3. Capitalise on the experience and expertise of political foundations when political actors are a target group for democracy assistance.
4. Take 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, thus, engaging bilaterally with sister parties at a project level, while guaranteeing an inclusive approach at a programmatic level.
5. Direct more European Commission funding towards the support of political parties in non-democratic countries.
6. Stimulate applied policy research on political party development within academia and think tanks by providing special funding.

ENoP recommends the European Commission and the European External Action Service to:

7. Advocate interaction and cooperation of political parties as a good practice that contributes to the creation of solid democratic party systems in its dialogue with partner countries.
8. Host a global conference on political party support, inviting political foundations and other relevant stakeholders, in order to exchange best practices and to facilitate further programming (special report with recommendations based on the outcomes of the conference).

9. Adhere to the Provisions of the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe for the free communication and cooperation of associations, including political parties and political foundations at the international level.
10. Encourage the exchange and cooperation of relevant stakeholders (academia, implementers, donors, political party representatives) in the context of specific projects.

To the European Endowment for Democracy to:

11. Support political parties in pursuance of the strategic goal of assisting the struggle of democratic transitions in the European Neighbourhood and beyond. Capitalise on the experience, expertise and existing structures of political foundations sur place.

*The European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP) is the representative platform of currently 70 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 the agenda-setting in the national and EU context. Since its establishment in 2006, accompanied by an inaugural speech of President Barroso, 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 by the EC 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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