

# Political Party Cooperation in Third Countries

## Key Elements of Effective EU Democracy Promotion

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# I. Context

Political parties are key instruments in achieving power in a representative democracy. This is the main reason why governments and political elites in all countries are highly sensitive to the cooperation of foreign actors with political parties. Understandably, these governments are opposed to outside influence affecting their domestic power structures.

However, political parties are not just instruments to achieve power in a representative democracy. Their structures and activities are also highly relevant for the inclusivity and stability of a representative democracy. If they are disorganized or dysfunctional, the quality of the democratic order, including government accountability and the respect and promotion of human rights, is negatively affected.

These two fundamental observations create a dilemma for the EU in its agenda to promote global democracy and human rights: if the EU excludes political party cooperation from its programs and activities, it cannot achieve important objectives in the field of democracy and human rights. If the EU includes political party cooperation, it risks running into serious conflict with the respective host countries' governments and political elites.

# II. The target groups and objective of an EU document on cooperation with political parties in third countries



During the last few decades, the EU has developed numerous documents and guidelines on the effective promotion of human rights in third countries. But there are no guidelines regarding the support of political party cooperation as part of effective democracy promotion. Until now, the EU has chosen not to exclude, but to minimize the issue of political party cooperation in its programs. The new action plan on Human Rights and Democracy for the years 2020 -2024 includes only a few sentences on political party cooperation and instead places its main focus for democracy promotion on civil society and human rights.

However, to achieve effective democracy promotion, it makes sense to engage in carefully differentiated cooperation with political parties depending on the general political situation of a third country and the relationships between domestic political parties. The effective promotion of inclusive representative democracies in third countries should be the general objective of a fundamental document on the engagement of the EU in political party cooperation.

Such a document should provide both of the following:

- (1) An orientation for EU-Delegations on when and how to engage in political party cooperation in different countries.
- (2) The provision and encouragement of strategies for European and third country stakeholders interested in engaging in activities within the framework of EU political party cooperation.



**POLITICAL PARTY  
COOPERATION AS AN  
ESSENTIAL PART  
OF EFFECTIVE  
DEMOCRACY  
PROMOTION**

# III. The function and role of political parties in an inclusive representative democracy



A discussion of effective democracy promotion requires a detailed look at the role of political parties in a pluralistic democracy:

- Political parties synthesize the demands of millions of citizens into a reasonable number of policies and development visions and incorporate these new policies into their programs.
- By competing with each other in elections, political parties provide the electorate with choices of essential orientation, legislative development, and key policy programs.
- Before campaigning begins, political parties select candidates who align with their programs and are willing and able to serve as representatives of the people.
- After elections, political parties convert their programmatic objectives into policy concepts and legislative projects in cooperation with their elected representatives.
- As governing parties, political parties support the government in the implementation of these concepts and legislative projects. As opposition parties, political parties provide the broader public with alternative options to change the government in the next elections.
- Political parties continuously involve citizens, especially their own members, through political discourse in between elections. Through political party involvement, citizens are able to take part in discussions and monitor governmental and parliamentary decisions in order to hold the government and their elected representatives accountable.

If these functions are supported by political party cooperation, the inclusivity of representative democracies in third countries will be effectively strengthened.

The capacity of political parties to fulfill these roles depends on

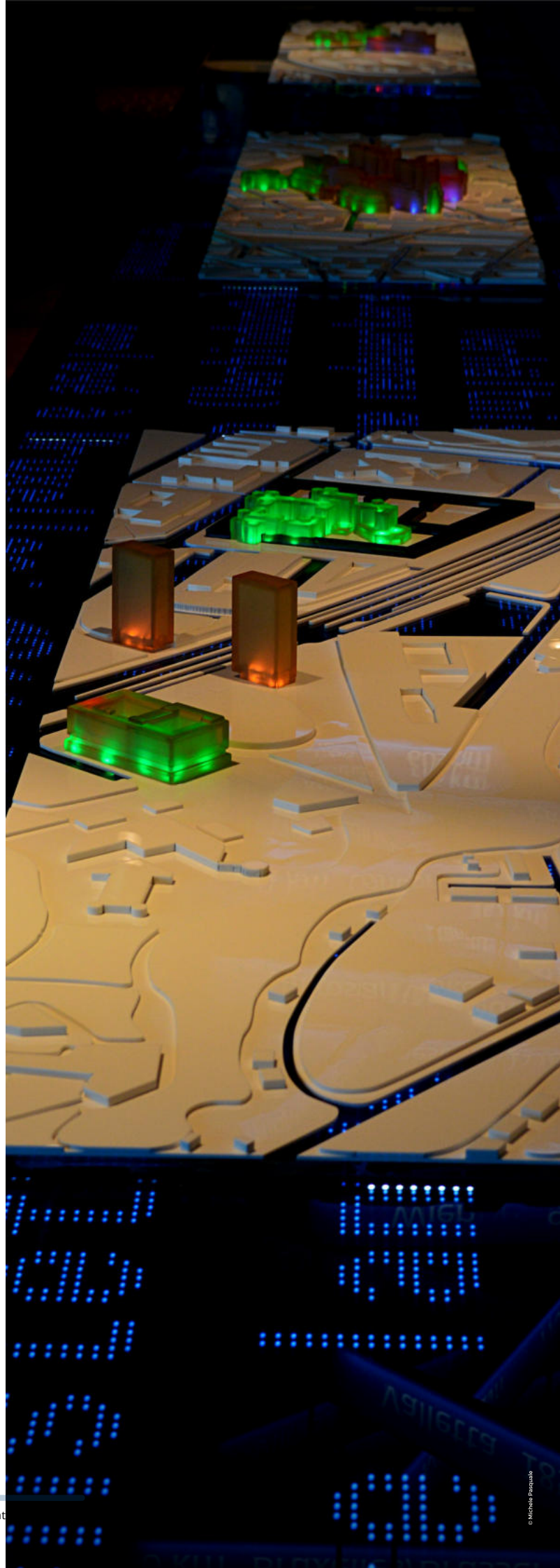
- a) the status and rights that political parties are given in the constitutional and legal system of a country, and
- b) their internal structures and procedures.

If political parties hold a weak legal status and minimal rights, their capacity to participate in elections and oversee parliamentary and government actions may be reduced. In this scenario, efforts by the EU to establish political party cooperation might focus on strengthening these fundamental conditions.

If the internal organization of a political party inhibits its ability to fulfill key functions for the democratic order, efforts by the EU to establish political party cooperation might focus on strengthening the democratic quality and professionalization of political parties. In many countries, it makes sense to combine both approaches.

In order for political parties to fulfill key democratic functions, their internal organization must:

- Have a clear programmatic profile that distinguishes them from other parties and allows the electorate to influence future policy orientation.
- Be based on real membership, rather than on the whims of a few influential people. Citizens and party members who share the basic orientation of the party must be the “owners” and decision-makers of the party, both for the selection of candidates for public elections and the continuous development of the party’s programmatic profile. This public ownership should be upheld through internal democratic procedures.
- Have a certain financial independence based on membership dues and/or state subsidies in accordance with transparent and non-partisan regulations. If a party is mostly dependent on donations, it will lose its internal democratic character – especially if the funding is not transparent and donation sizes are not limited.
- Be involved not only on the national level, but also in cities, counties, and districts. Political parties should maintain active discourse with citizens and the broader public year-round – not just during campaigns and elections.
- Political parties continuously involve citizens, especially their own members, through political discourse in between elections. Through political party involvement, citizens are able to take part in discussions and monitor governmental and parliamentary decisions in order to hold the government and their elected representatives accountable.





# IV. General considerations on how the EU may engage in political party cooperation in third countries



Political party cooperation is particularly sensitive in nature, given its potential to influence how and by whom political power is exercised in a country. Therefore, the best general approach for the EU is to maintain a dialogue with the government of a respective country that allows the EU to remain active in the field of democracy promotion.

As foreign institutions with diplomatic character and rights, EU Delegations normally arrange direct cooperation with either foreign governments, public organizations, or private actors under binding agreements. If the EU and a foreign government agree that building the capacity of parliaments and legitimate political parties would benefit the country's democracy, development, and stability, such projects could be included in the formal cooperation between the EU the respective foreign government. In a multi-party political environment with the possibility of political change through elections, these cooperative agreements must ensure the non-partisan character of such capacity building and consulting activities under the EU programs. Normally the EU will not engage in political party cooperation in third countries directly, but rather through a formal cooperation agreement with the respective government.

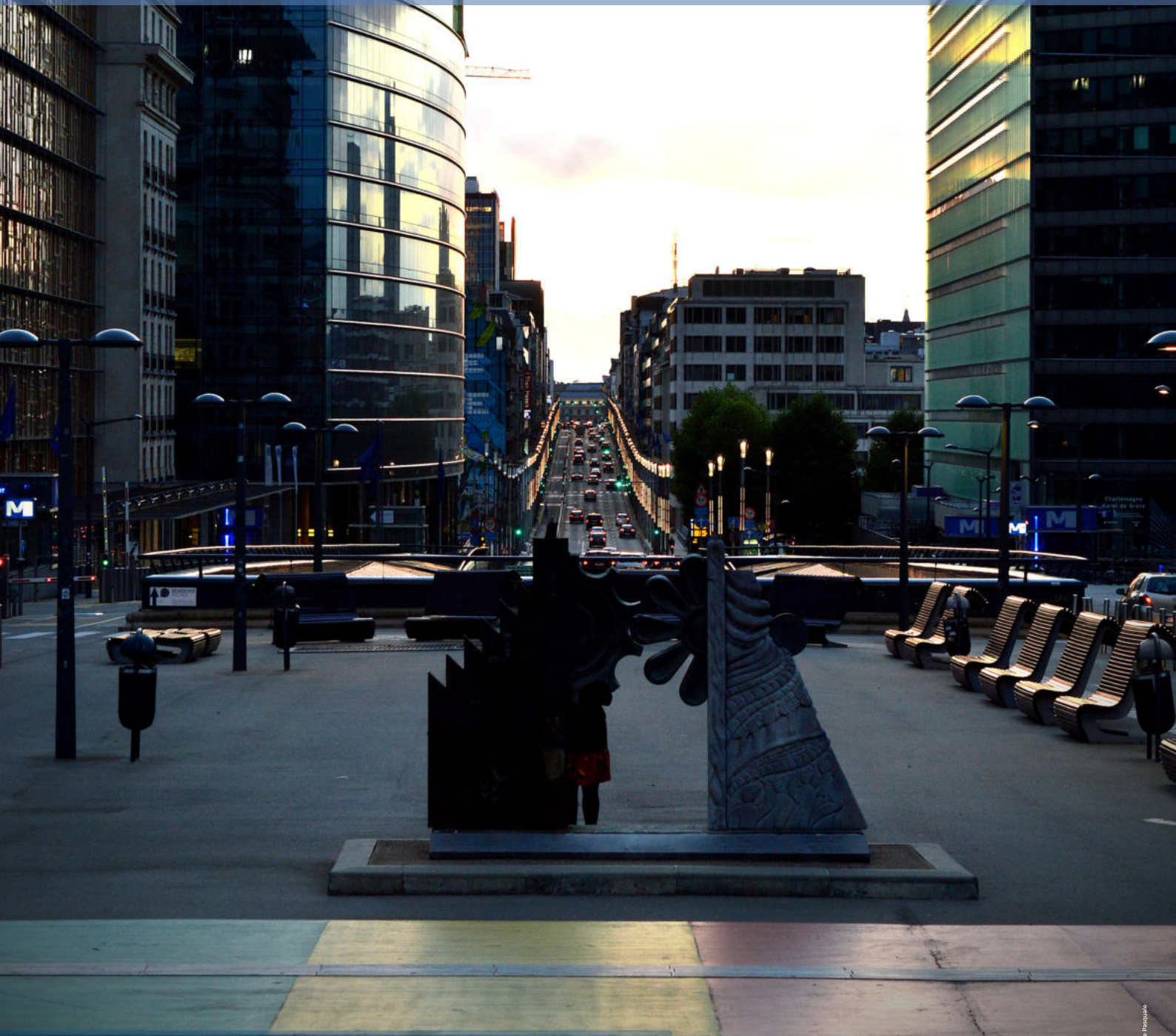
The European understanding of citizens' basic freedoms includes their right to cooperate with civil society groups and organizations, including independent political parties, both inside and outside their country. Through its thematic programs, specifically the Democracy and Human Rights Program, the EU promotes and supports the transnational cooperation of non-state actors, including political parties. As long as this promotion is conducted in a non-partisan way, third country governments may accept these programs as being beneficial to inclusive democratic development.

However, there are numerous countries in which the government, despite calling itself a democracy, does not feel comfortable with the promotion of non-partisan, political party cooperation. Often, these governments fear that strengthening multi-party systems and the inclusivity of political parties will lead to changes in the power structures that they dominate. In such countries, the EU must assess whether the government will silently tolerate certain forms of political party cooperation in spite of their negative attitude towards the involvement of foreign actors - or if it will prevent such programs entirely.



**CITIZENS' BASIC  
FREEDOMS  
INCLUDES THEIR  
RIGHT TO  
COOPERATE WITH  
CIVIL SOCIETY AND  
POLITICAL PARTIES**

# V. The relevance of different country situations for EU engagement in political party cooperation



An EU document on political party cooperation should differentiate its recommendations based on the constitutional, legal, and political situation of respective countries. This also applies to the ways the document is used by EU-Delegations to allocate funding for projects that involve both European and local actors in foreign countries. Typical country situations can be characterized as follows:

- The constitution and the relevant laws of a country characterize it as a multi-party representative democracy. Additionally, the government and leading political elites are generally interested in professionalizing and strengthening the political party system and relevant political parties as an instrument for peaceful political changes, inclusive development, and political and socio-economic stability.
- In spite of characterizing themselves as a representative democracy, the government and leading political elites of a country are not interested in strengthening the country's political party system and respective political parties, as they do not want to lose political control to another party in free and fair elections.
- As per the constitution and key political laws, only one political group or party is considered legitimate or viewed as the leading political party of the country. The involvement of stakeholders, both outside of the political party structure and outside of the country, is considered illegal and strictly prevented.

In most countries where the EU is represented by a delegation that is implementing or supporting projects, the situation is somewhere in between (1) and (2). In the process of promoting inclusive democracy through political party cooperation, each EU-Delegation must assess how much it can openly support the development of a strong and inclusive political party system and the existence of legally-registered parties.

Alternatively, EU-Delegations might cautiously support both European and local stakeholders through non-partisan, thematic programs – relying on the local government's silent toleration.



**SUPPORT THE  
DEVELOPMENT  
OF A STRONG  
AND INCLUSIVE  
POLITICAL  
PARTY SYSTEM**

# VI. Supporting a sound, multi-party political system



Prior to developing a cooperation strategy in a given country, a detailed assessment should be conducted in order to understand the capacity of parties to influence political decisions, achieve political power, and compete against each other fairly. Such an assessment should focus on the following questions:

- Do the electoral laws provide political parties with the key responsibility of selecting qualified candidates for positions in national and local parliaments? Or, do they allow local dynasties and powerful single personalities within constituencies to dominate the elections, with political parties only playing a minor role? The two extremes are either

a) systems with fully proportional elections based on votes for political party lists, or

b) systems with direct elections of single candidates without the need for party affiliation.

- Do the internal organization rules of the national and local parliaments provide majority parties with a strong coordinating and agenda setting role in order to support the standing government? Similarly, do these rules allow opposition parties to engage in effective government oversight and offer thematic alternative options?

Are there clear rules for the protection of minority rights within the operation and decision-making mechanisms of the parliaments? Parliaments are key instruments with which to exercise power and influence political decisions. If political parties do not have a clear status in the framework of parliamentary activities, they may not be very relevant in the power structure of the country.

- Are there legal regulations on the establishment, management, and activities of political parties that enforce internal democratic decision-making in the thematic orientation and selection of candidates for democratic elections? Without such regulations, which might be compiled within a political party's laws, the role which political parties play in securing an inclusive representative democracy may be very limited.

- Are party financing rules existent and strictly implemented, ensuring complete transparency of party operations? Is there a minimum of independence from big donors, state subsidies, and membership dues as well as maximum limits for single donations? If political parties are neither transparent, nor independent from big donations, they can no longer be considered civil society organizations with influence over political decision-making, but must instead be characterized as pressure groups formed by powerful citizens.
- Are all political parties equally free to oppose the government? Do political parties have ensured, open, and non-discriminated access to media, information, and to an independent judiciary, separate from their role as governing or opposition parties? Is there a code of ethics for campaigning activities and for public dealings between parties?

Based on the results of an assessment that targets these questions, EU Delegations can design a specific set of actions that aim to strengthen the political party system.

Such actions might focus on:

- improving electoral laws on political parties,
- enhancing parliamentary procedures that distinguish political party groups as key decisionmakers in accordance to their election results,
- reforming democratic political party law to increase inclusivity,
- updating party financing regulations to ensure transparency and the independence of political parties from powerful groups, including from state subsidies
- levelling the playing field in the competition between different parties and designing a code of ethics for party campaigning and public relations.

Such fundamental improvements to the legal framework of political party operations can only be achieved with a certain degree of acceptance from the country's government and main political forces. However, without support from the outside, such important developments might not happen at all. And without strong political parties, the power structure and political decision-making in a country – even one formally constituted as a representative democracy – will be dominated by traditional networks of dynasties, families, and powerful business groups. Strong political parties therefore have the potential to become a powerful force of social and political modernization.

An EU-supported political party cooperation project should build awareness for the benefits of such changes to the inclusivity and stability of representative democracies. Further, EU-Delegations might provide technical consultancy on such projects and lobby a country's main political parties to cooperate.



# VII. Supporting relevant political parties in fulfilling their functions for an inclusive representative democracy





In some countries, even those that define themselves as multi-party representative democracies, political parties are hindered from establishing inclusive political participation amongst the citizens. Through a multi-party, political cooperation project, the EU (either directly or through qualified European stakeholders) can offer advice and support for all interested and relevant political parties to overcome such weaknesses. Such advice can include:

- consulting and capacity building for elected representatives in local and national parliaments on how to arrange regular and open communication with their electorate and bring their interests and concerns into the work of the parliaments
- encouraging and supporting the recruitment of women, youth, and other groups of underrepresented citizens for active membership in the parties and for political participation activities,
- creating guidelines for the review of internal political party statutes in order to improve democratic decision-making and transparency within political parties, thus making them more attractive to citizens,
- consulting and training on how to present key party objectives to the media and the broader public.

However, in a polarized political situation where interparty competition is high and parties view the opposition as enemies, they may be reluctant to join political party cooperation projects with international stakeholders and their competitor parties.

Party representatives may not be willing to learn from or consult with their political opponents. Even if the project is offered separately to each individual party, there may be reluctance to fully embrace the message behind consulting activities if they are also being offered to the other political opponents.

Reluctance as a result of polarization can be ameliorated through a peer to peer cooperation approach. Cooperation must be built on mutual respect, understanding, and trust. This is especially true when consulting projects address the development of a sound and cohesive political platform and promote strictly-controlled, democratic procedures for internal party operations.

In such situations, peer to peer cooperation between foreign and local political parties that builds on shared political philosophies or visions will be much more effective than a multi-party approach. In order to avoid the accusation of partisan support from the respective country, an assortment of peer to peer cooperation projects can be supported.

These projects should partner relevant political parties with suitable foreign organizations - preferably European political foundations that align with different areas of the political spectrum.



VIII. Political Parties  
and Civil Society -  
key actors for public  
participation in an  
inclusive representative  
democracy

It is about  
millions

The participation of citizens in political decision-making through elected representatives is the core mechanism of a representative democracy. Although civil society is often heralded as the counterpart of state institutions, it cannot be considered an actor itself. Instead, there are civil society groups and organizations that are able to act within the political decision-making sphere. While some uphold idealistic values for the common good of society, others pursue the legitimate interests of disadvantaged groups. However, there is no clear line between these civil society organizations and pressure groups that fight for the economic interests of those who are already privileged. In many countries, civil society groups also advocate for the interests of farmers, workers, elderly people, and ethnic or religious minorities through specifically organized political parties.

Therefore, a political party can be considered as a type of civil society organization that tries to achieve its objectives by involving itself directly in the general participation mechanisms of a representative democracy.

In some situations, the weakness, exclusivity, and non-democratic nature of political parties and procedures in many countries have caused civil society organizations to be more representative of citizens than their elected parliamentary officials. This often occurs when civil society organizations are the main defenders of the following:

- common good objectives such as the protection of human rights, the environment, the rule of law, good governance, and the freedom of media or
- the interests of disadvantaged and discriminated groups such as ethnic minorities, women, factory workers, and poor and landless farmers.

Despite being the key advocates for the aforementioned groups, civil society groups are often not legitimized through general elections, even in their own respective organizations.

There is plenty of evidence that civil society groups can influence political decisions from outside of the representative system, be it through dialogue with governments, public campaigning, or the organization of protests.

However, experience also shows that these groups struggle to sustain their influence throughout lengthy legislative processes and in the follow-up phase of policy implementation. Therefore, it would be a mistake to ignore legitimate political parties and parliamentary representatives in an attempt to strengthen the inclusivity of public political participation. In addition to promoting common good oriented civil society groups, it makes sense to support the operational framework, democratic quality, inclusivity and professionalization of political parties through political party cooperation. This promotion should continue so long as these parties align with the constitutional and cultural values of the country - not when they serve the greed of single political personalities.

Furthermore, EU action plans should promote close cooperation between political parties and civil society groups, including intensive dialogue and joint campaigning for common good issues at the parliamentary and governmental level.

Political parties and civil society groups should create alliances in order to advocate and promote legislative action effectively for joint objectives, organizing and sharing the division of labor. In certain situations, these partnerships should consider integrating prominent civil society advocates in candidate lists for local and national elections.

# IX. The role and relevance of engagement in political party cooperation for EU Foreign Policy



Although the EU is considered to be a leading economic power, only a small group of elites in certain countries tend to recognize the EU as an advocate for governance, peace, freedom, and inclusive socio-economic development based on the values of human dignity. However, increasing international connectivity as a result of globalization has made value - and interest-based partnerships an important objective of EU foreign policy on both regional and global levels.

EU engagement in third country, political party cooperation is not risk-free. For example, dominant groups may not want to change the status quo (and risk losing their power) by leveling the playing field of representative democracy. There is an added risk that certain political parties might become supportive instruments of authoritarian rulers after achieving political power through EU-backed programs.

On the other hand, EU engagement in political party cooperation offers ample opportunities for promoting constructive partnerships in the areas of peace and security, climate change and disaster prevention, the management of migration, or other thematic fields. Political parties are the key channels through which future leaders develop both their understanding of policies and original ideas.

Through political party cooperation programs, the EU and European stakeholders develop trusting and supportive relationships with future political leaders, independent from the ruling government and any potential political changes.

Rather than structuring programs around financial transfers and trade relationships, relationships should be cultivated collaboratively while working towards solutions within the domestic cultural context. A more conscious partnership such as this will lead to deeper, mutual understandings between partners. Joint conferences, multilateral meetings, and bilateral talks can provide current and future political leaders of partner countries with opportunities for serious exchange on the experiences and political concepts of European countries - an important element of deepening understanding and partnerships. If organized in a systematic and carefully differentiated way, engagement in political party cooperation in third countries can add a highly effective new dimension of sustainable partnerships to the foreign policy of the EU.



**ENGAGEMENT IN  
POLITICAL PARTY  
COOPERATION  
CAN ADD A HIGHLY  
EFFECTIVE NEW  
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FOREIGN POLICY OF  
THE EU.**

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