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1

Introduction

Irene Hahn-Fuhr and Susann Worschech

When the bulldozers and tractors were heading to the Serbian capital in October 2000, bringing aggrieved farmers and citizens from the Serbian provinces to Belgrade in order to ‘bring down a dictator’,¹ one could get an idea of what the political power of civil society could look like. The same image has been repeated several times since then, from the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the tent camps at Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kiev, Ukraine in November 2004, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, and the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon in 2005, to the 2011 ‘Arabellions’: large protest campaigns, organized by civil society activists and supported by international actors. If we follow these examples, well-elaborated strategies to bring the people to the streets and to convince them to struggle for democracy have become a serious threat for authoritarian regimes worldwide. In the given examples, it is no secret that the successful challenges to autocratic power have been strongly supported by external actors.

However, while civil society fostered by international support has experienced several overwhelming success stories, democracy has stagnated or even declined in most of the countries involved. This puzzle forms the starting point of this volume: Is civil society able to contribute substantially to democratization of post-socialist authoritarian systems? Can external civil society oriented democracy promotion contribute substantially to democratization in target countries? Scholars as well as practitioners have made ambitious attempts to define and perceive democracy promotion and civil society in different ways. However, the mismatch between the input and outcome of democracy promotion – in particular via civil society – remains little understood. The aim of this volume is to elucidate this relationship by offering theoretical approaches as well as empirical case studies from different perspectives.

2 *Civil Society and Democracy Promotion*

1.1 **External support for civil society: ambitious aims, ambivalent results**

Since the days of the political and economic transition in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989–91, civil society has become the focus of active political promotion of democracy by the international community. As a consequence, civil society in these states has seen dramatic and rapid developments in the last two decades. Civil society is presumed to be a general factor that facilitates democratic transitions in two ways and in two different phases: either ‘by helping to generate a transition from authoritarian rule to (at least) electoral democracy’ or ‘by deepening and consolidating democracy once it is established’ (Diamond, 1999, 233). Thus, it is a common assumption that stable and functioning democracies depend to a large extent on vibrant civil societies. However, that vision is challenged by many post-socialist transitions which display a broad variety of transition paths. They prove that democratization should not be understood in teleological terms: While some of the former socialist societies have today become consolidated democracies and EU members, many post-Soviet countries may be characterized as hybrid regimes (Diamond, 2002). After first steps toward democracy, their political direction now alternates between democratization and re-autocratization.

At the same time, variation in the effect of external political assistance is obvious. Whereas EU enlargement has turned out to be a powerful and successful democratization tool of EU foreign policy in the (potential) candidate countries for EU membership (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005; Vachudova, 2005), EU democracy promotion has been much less successful in the rest of the EU neighborhood (Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008).² The most important mechanism has proven to be conditionality, whereas institutional learning, socialization, and international norm adoption have been of minor relevance.

The role that civil society has played within these different contexts of democracy promotion varies to a great extent (Kutter & Trappmann, 2010). Research on civil society and democratization has focused on different groups of cases. The first phase of research was linked to transition countries in general – Huntington referred to them as the Third Wave of Democratization (Huntington, 1993) – and was marked by conceptual transfer. The democratizing functions of civil society were primarily developed and discussed with reference to existing democracies. When strong civic associations and movements such as the Polish *Solidarność* and other opposition groups drove the socialist systems in Central Europe to their knees, it seemed obvious to apply the knowledge about

established democracies to processes of regime change. Consequently, democracy promotion programs of the first phase were designed with this knowledge in mind and aimed at the support of civil society groups that would aggregate citizens' interests, advocate them against the state, provide broader access to political decision-making, and establish a democratic culture (Carothers, 1999a; 1999b).

The empirical results of this first phase in Central (and Eastern) Europe fed into theoretical expectations that were not met in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Consequently, a second research phase started in which scholars explored less successful and more difficult cases. This phase was marked by empirical perspectives which gave cause for a more pessimistic view. After the first decade of democracy promotion efforts in Central and Eastern Europe had passed, practitioners and scholars stated that – despite undeniable efforts – very little civil society existed. Even where it did, it was described as 'weak' (Howard, 2002). Many civil society organizations had been built from scratch by Western aid agencies and transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and were characterized as 'artificial' (Mandel, 2002). Case studies showed that externally supported civil society did not perform the expected functions, whether because of a lack of constituency or a limited influence on elites and decision-makers (Mendelson & Glenn, 2002). Henderson argued that Western support to NGOs in post-socialist countries had created a distinct civic elite, which lacked horizontal ties to other groups and society, and that assistance programs led to 'the business of aid' (Henderson, 2002). Thus, after a decade of experience of intensive democracy assistance, civil society was rather seen as 'engineered' (Ishkanian, 2007) and unlikely to perform the ascribed functions.

Hence, democracy promotion via civil society displays an ambivalent picture. Although most theories suggest that civil society is a necessary feature of vibrant democracies, supporting civil society does not necessarily lead to democratization. Today, in post-socialist Europe there are huge numbers of civic organizations working on democracy issues and campaigns.³ However, while external promotion of civil society as a purpose in itself appears to be successful in quantitative terms, it does not seem to translate into effective democratization.

1.2 About this book

We inquire into the interplay of external democratization and civil society in three parts: a theory part, a part that focuses on democracy promoting actors, and a part that concentrates on civil society itself.

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In the first part, we present two different overviews, which offer two contrasting perspectives of approaching and connecting the research fields. In the first contribution, Irene Hahn-Fuhr and Susann Worschech offer a framework that links democracy donors, civil society, and ‘target groups’ of democratization such as administrative bodies and intermediary organizations including the media and citizens. They argue that donor strategies based on different conceptions of civil society’s democratizing functions require specific types of civil society actors as their ‘counterparts’. Furthermore, they indicate that external financial aid produces a division between externally funded and non-funded civic actors, and that this division and the stagnating democratization process are interdependent. In this view, civil society is not only represented as the recipient of democracy assistance, but also serves as a hinge between democracy donor intentions and the domestic actors which are in the end decisive for the further development of democratization.

The second overview is written by Timm Beichelt and Wolfgang Merkel. Their contribution aims at analyzing the interplay between external democracy promotion and civil society but offers a different focus. Like Hahn-Fuhr and Worschech, they start from the functions that civil society exerts on democratization, but classify them differently and continue by discussing them with regard to the compatibility of donor and democracy recipient action. Out of a considerable variety of options for both external and domestic actors, Beichelt and Merkel single out a few potential paths for civil society oriented democracy promotion. One of their findings consists in the fact that most of those feasible paths include foreign cooperation not only with civil society organizations but also with regime elites.

With these two different theoretical concepts, we start the volume by presenting a contrasting juxtaposition of perspectives to link civil society and external democracy promotion. While the first concept deploys a more process-oriented approach to explain ambivalent results such as the divided civil society, the second concept assigns civil society’s functions to stages of democratization, regime characteristics, and modes of democracy promotion. The tensions that emerge from this conceptual juxtaposition cannot be reduced to the antagonism of ‘top-down’ versus ‘bottom-up’ democratization mechanisms, although this also constitutes an important aspect. In the following contributions to this volume, both perspectives are in use in the quest to develop a deeper understanding of the complex interplay of civil society and external democracy promotion.

The second part of this volume contains three texts which center on the actors who try to promote democracy. Our three authors contribute to a growing literature on potential obstacles to active external democratization. Jonas Wolff looks for them on the meso level by identifying several inherent tensions in the external promotion of democracy and civil society. Wolff argues that three dilemmas that are well known from democratization theory also apply if civil society is included as the primary focus of democracy promotion: democracy versus stability, democracy versus governability, democracy versus majority. He demonstrates that external democracy promotion is systematically confronted with conflicting objectives concerning both the overall business of democracy promotion and the specific field of civil society support.

In the next chapter, Richard Youngs and Natalia Shapovalova focus on one of the major actors supporting civil society in Eastern Europe: the European Union. Their chapter demonstrates the improvements and shortcomings of European efforts to bolster civil society across the countries of the Eastern Partnership. Youngs and Shapovalova present a history of EU originated civil society support and discuss the strategies behind the many turns in EU democracy promotion as well as contextual factors influencing the choices of the European Commission. While the authors detect a growing goal orientation in the EU's overall program of democracy promotion, they also identify a series of weaknesses. In particular, they find that the impact of the EU's quite generously funded civil society programs remains disappointing.

Tsveta Petrova turns to a specific group of external democracy promoters, namely transnational civil society organizations based in the former transition countries of Poland and Slovakia. In her chapter, Petrova analyzes the motivation of transnational democracy and human rights activists and tries to resolve the dispute if this happens for normative or opportunistic reasons. She finds that democracy promoters from former socialist countries are much closer to the experiences of actors in recipient countries. Among other consequences, this leads Central European actors to focus on technical assistance which is helpful on the ground.

Part III of the book then turns to the 'recipient side' – to civil society and its groups in democratizing countries, to the consequences of civil society oriented democracy assistance and to the developments of post-socialist democracy in relation to domestic civil society action. Four contributions elucidate these aspects. Donatella della Porta addresses the role of social movements in democratization processes. She starts from the observation that social movement studies have often stressed conflicts whereas the transition literature tends to regard political

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conflicts as an impediment to further democratization. The chapter then discusses some potential implications for democracy promotion.

Armine Ishkanian's chapter examines the impact of 20 years of external democracy promotion policies that have focused on building and strengthening civil society in the former socialist countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states. She critically examines the achievements and missed opportunities of externally funded democracy promotion which led to the exponential growth of formal and professionalized NGOs. Her chapter then examines the recent emergence of new civic initiatives and other non-institutionalized, volunteer-based forms of collective action throughout the former post-Soviet countries. While many observers regard these grassroots organizations as marginalized and non-political, Ishkanian shows with many examples that the new civic initiatives indeed perform politically and, moreover, offer alternative forms of civic participation.

In her contribution, Štěpánka Busuleanu looks at externally promoted actors by analyzing the biographies of a selection of activists promoted by a Western donor organization. Her chapter therefore takes a strictly individualistic perspective on democracy recipients. She asks what biographical conditions enable 'the ordinary citizen' in becoming an activist. Are there underlying patterns of action and interpretations that can be found? How does Western promotion affect the activists' biographies? Busuleanu argues that such actors' potential for civic engagement is determined not only by the socio-political framework, but mainly by opportunity structures and the legacies of previous regimes in their respective pattern of action. In other words, the perceived impact of Western democracy promoters is judged as more or less marginal.

In the last chapter of Part III, Franziska Blomberg and Edina Szöcsik look at civic and political involvement of individuals by inquiring into participation rates in civic organizations and political parties. They demonstrate that civic and political engagement follows different trajectories in Central Europe. They establish an explanatory model which singles out certain individual factors, partisan linkages, and the levels of economic and democratic development as decisive for the likelihood of individual participation. With these last contributions, it becomes clear that the success of civil society in democratization – and thus the potential effectiveness of external assistance – depends to a large extent on contextual factors that are beyond the reach of international promoters of democracy.

In the final chapter, Frank Schimmelfennig summarizes the various findings of the book. He reviews the processes, instruments, and merits

of civil society support from the viewpoint of three models of democracy promotion: leverage, governance, and linkage. The chapter argues that the effectiveness of political conditionality in Eastern Europe is inhibited by the weakness of the West's incentives and bargaining power and the high political adoption costs for the authoritarian regimes in the region. Democracy promotion according to the governance model suffers from the weak implementation of democratic governance provisions and the dominance of clientelistic networks.

With regard to the linkage model of direct civil society support, the contributions to the volume provide a critical assessment of past democracy promotion practices in Eastern Europe and point to alternative strategies of support and civil society actors. Many of the contributions remain skeptical about the potential for a positive impact on democracy that such alternatives can have under conditions of public mutual mistrust and state repression of civil society. However, most authors also recognize the intrinsic value of civil society for the autonomy of groups from the state; both as a means of protecting and as a barrier to further democratic decline.

In combination, the contributions to this volume represent a broad variety of disciplines, approaches, and methods to study democratization, civil society, and external support in post-socialist Europe. The region's ambivalent development of democracy – at some points showing clear tendencies of re-autocratization – and the negative consequences for civil society in the short term make a continued discussion necessary. Large parts of our volume deal with the empirical aspects of this stagnation. In theoretical terms, however, the assembled texts spread hopes that civil society still bears the potential to contribute to the flourishing of democracy. It seems certain by now that the hopes that were linked to civil society in the early phase of transition were overly optimistic. New forms of civic engagement and a more symmetrical interaction between democracy promoters and civil society groups in democratizing countries can be identified as models for a growing self-confidence of society vis-à-vis the state and its elites.

Notes

1. 'Bringing Down a Dictator' is a documentary by Steve York and Miriam Zimmerman. It portrays the spectacular defeat of Slobodan Milošević by non-violent protest strategies and massive civil disobedience in October 2000. The film and more information are available at <http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org/films/bdd/>.

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2. We define 'EU Neighborhood' here according to the EU's definition of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) as a bilateral policy between the EU and each partner country of the ENP. The ENP framework includes 16 of the EU's closest neighbors – Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria, Tunisia, and Ukraine; see also http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/policy_en.htm.
3. In Ukraine, for example, there are more than 7000 active NGOs (Palyvoda & Golota, 2010).

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