FUNDING NGOs, FUNDING CONFLICT? REFLECTIONS ON EUROPEAN UNION CIVIL SOCIETY FUNDING IN TURKEY

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Over the past decade, and particularly since the events of September 11th, democracy-building programmes have become an essential element of donor strategies for dispersing international aid. The assumption is that by supporting local civil society actors, donors can encourage critical debate that will make governments more accountable and more responsive to the demands of its citizens. Many questions remain, however, as to the effectiveness of these strategies. How local are the organisations that receive international aid? To what extent can the actions of these organisations be deemed independent, given the asymmetrical power relations between the donor and the recipient? Given the emphasis on short term project funding, can donor efforts make a lasting contribution to processes of democratisation that are by their very nature slow to develop and dependent on local political realities?

This paper investigates the extent to which donor-led civil society funding programs can induce democratization. It focuses on the case of European Union civil society funding in Turkey. The paper demonstrates how the European Union justifies its civil society funding on the bases of the contribution made to democratization. Civil society organisations are inherently positive, to the extent that the number of NGOs is taken as an indication of the ‘health’ of a democracy. It further shows that there has been a significant shift in the type of programmes that EU funds which asks civil society fulfil a rather different role from what it was previously. Instead of democratization, this new role sees civil society as helping with ‘policy Europeanization’, i.e. making sure that Turkey fulfils the technical criteria of the pre-accession negotiations. The paper argues that such sudden shifts of policy priorities – commonplace in the foreign policy arena – are unhelpful to the development of civil society on the ground.

Juxtaposed with this rapidly shifting policy environment are the dynamics of Turkish civil society on the ground. Although in terms of the sheer number of organizations, Turkish civil society appears vibrant and healthy, some observers question this by pointing to the antagonistic relationships that prevail between organisations. The claims made by civil society organisations are framed in essentialist terms, based on a ‘totalizing discourse’ that is not aiming for reconciliation of differences. This view is also prevalent among NGO practitioners, who view the lack of cooperation and prevalence of animosity between groups as a problem to be quickly resolved. Given these dynamics, it is questionable whether EU efforts at civil society funding are contributing to democratization as they intend to.

This paper, based on interviews among Turkish NGOs, argues that we should not shy away from the antagonistic relationships within civil society, for these are a crucial pillar of Turkey’s democratic development; the ‘growing pains’ of democratization. Donors, by focusing too heavily on the positive contribution that civil society can make, and encouraging certain type of behaviour in civil society by making funding available only under particular programmes. As long as these essentialist debates and ‘growing pains’ exist, civil society is likely to resist the efforts to ascribe to the Western norms of civil society.

REFERENCES:


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