European Democracy Hub

A New Phase of Civic Movements:

Implications for International Democracy Support

By Richard Youngs, Elene Panchulidze, and Carlotta Magoga

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European Democracy Hub
Rue Froissart 123-133
B-1040 Brussels
info@europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu
https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/

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Introduction

In the last decade, civil society across the world has experienced significant change, as new civic movements and individual activists have played an increasingly important role in driving democratic processes. Especially since the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent closing of civic space in 2020, such informal civic activism has intensified across Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe, and has taken on new issues and tactics. Tightly connected to this trend is the dramatic rise in protest activity that has dominated many media headlines globally.[1] This increase in innovative, youth, and non-violent activism is a manifestation of assertive citizenship, and it is notable that this trend has unfolded even as most policy and analytical attention has been on democratic backsliding.

This report examines the implications of this new phase of intense informal civic activism for democracy and democracy-support strategies. While much has been written on social movements, and the report reinforces many familiar points, this analysis offers up-to-date evidence of an emerging phase of activism and finds new developments in international support strategies. The report draws on evidence from five countries: Belarus, Georgia, Nicaragua, Senegal, and Thailand. We selected these countries because they have all experienced civic uprisings or mobilisations over the past decade and have all attracted significant international democracy funding. Differences across regime types and regions also played a role in the selection process and are detailed in our methodological approach.[2]

Thailand has since 2020 witnessed dynamic civic movements that have demanded democracy and advocated reform of the military and the monarchy.[3] Belarus has seen its largest and most sustained civic mobilisation since the stolen 2020 presidential election.[4] In Senegal, civic movements played a crucial role in ousting an autocratising regime in 2024.[5] In Georgia, new grassroots movements have emerged in response to democratic backsliding since 2019 and transformed into a large-scale anti-government mobilisation.[6] And in Nicaragua, democracy activists have adopted many new informal strategies as they defend themselves against an especially repressive regime.[7]

Across these countries, the report notes emerging new features of informal activism. One particularly important change lies in the relationship between novel social movements and more established, formal civil society organisations (CSOs). New forms of coordination are emerging between the informal and formal parts of global civil society. This incipient phase of activism holds great democratic potential but has also attracted the attention of undemocratic regimes: over the last decade, autocratic and illiberal leaders have used brutal measures to suppress these emerging forms of civic mobilisation.[8] Beyond jailing and brutally assaulting members of civic movements, regimes have attempted to discredit them with accusations of orchestrating foreign-led revolutions and attempts to destabilise their countries.[9]

International democracy support has yet to catch up with the changing shape of global civil society. As political developments such as the decision by the United States (US) to cut democracy aid reinforce autocratic dynamics, the role of civic mobilisation and civic movements becomes all the more important.[10] With the European Commission currently drawing up a European civil society strategy, a deeper understanding of civil society trends is vital.[11] Closer examination of possible strategies towards this shifting civil society landscape is required.[12] Most democracy-support donors remain ambivalent on the question of whether they should back informal civic movements and individual activists, given the lack of institutionalisation and accountability mechanisms. This report argues that donors should support the new phase of civic movements, but in tandem with, rather than separately from, their existing support for CSOs.

Our approach

This report forms part of a project carried out by the European Democracy Hub in 2024 and early 2025. In addition to analysing existing studies of social movements, the project collected original, primary information from Belarus, Georgia, Nicaragua, Senegal, and Thailand.[13] The selection of countries was based on several factors: political developments over the last decade, particularly large-scale civic and grassroots mobilisations; regional diversity; and differences in political regimes, societal pluralism, and the civil society landscape.[14]

We expressly covered countries where emerging civic movements are driving democratic politics and have received democracy assistance. The project did not aim at a general assessment of the impact of international democracy support on civic movements. Rather, the goal was to better understand the key questions that donors need to consider in their support for civic movements.

The European Democracy Hub worked with the Heinrich Böll Foundation and its offices in the five countries. Between July 2024 and February 2025, we conducted 20 online semi-structured interviews in English and French with staff from the foundation and representatives of both traditional CSOs and informal activism. These interviews were conducted using the snowball sampling technique. During the interviews, we enquired about the factors that drive civic mobilisations in each country.

We did not begin with a predetermined division of civil society between formal CSOs and civic movements; rather, this division emerged during our conversations with local activists and reflected their views. We then explicitly sought to better investigate the divergence and the contrasting trends of partnership and cooperation between informal and formal civil society. We also asked representatives of civil society and donor organisations about the challenges of democracy support for emerging civic movements. For safety reasons, the interviews were confidential and we do not refer to individuals or organisations. In some instances, we identify the country in question with the permission of our interlocutors.

After we had gathered the data, we organised a focus group that included activists from the five countries as well as representatives of democracy-support donors, Brussels-based civil society, European Union (EU) institutions, and researchers. We brought together 17 participants from the target groups for a two-day retreat with facilitated workshops and discussions. This allowed us to verify the findings of our report and address with activists the most sensitive issues that we had not managed to explore in the interviews. We also presented the draft report in a democracy dialogue – a behind-closed-doors, off-the-record discussion that brought together 38 experts who work on issues related to civic space and democracy support, donors, and policymakers based in Brussels. This report includes feedback from this expert and activist community.

In terms of conceptual definitions, “formal civil society” refers to organised, structured groups with an official registration, an institutional structure, an identifiable brand, and focused objectives.

Meanwhile, "informal activism" refers to forms of civic participation and organisation that are more fluid, often unregistered, unstructured, and less hierarchical.[15] Such informal groups may lack institutional structures and may emerge spontaneously in response to a particular political or social issue.

The literature and the practitioners' community mostly use the term "social movements". In one definition, these are "instances of collective action which vary in degrees of formal organisation, scale of mobilisation and forms of action".[16] This report adopts the term "civic movement" because the civil society representatives we interviewed preferred this concept to that of social movements. In line with this grassroots preference, the term "civic movement" refers to a collective effort by individuals, activists, or informal groups that is driven by a desire to address a spectrum of societal issues and often advocates social or political change. In this and other ways, the report draws on contributions from civil society actors in the countries covered by the report, incorporating local voices and highlighting how civic actors on the ground perceive the emerging phase of civic activism.

A new phase of civic movements

For several decades, experts have been charting the emergence of new social movements with reference to the post-material identities that have displaced organised labour.[17] Analyses of social movements debate whether this growth has resulted from increased resources, new political opportunities, or evolving identities.[18] There is widespread agreement that the rise of new civic movements has become significant enough in recent years to invite a rethink of the concept of civil society.[19]

Among practitioners and analysts, there has been a gradual move away from a focus on formal civil society structures towards an emphasis on new civic practices. These have been rooted in notably informal structures and a shift towards community-based organisation as the primary vehicle of social mobilisation. This community-level self-organisation has helped revive civic life in many places.

Environmental activism, in particular, has moved in this direction, with an increasing focus on local communities organising to preserve and manage natural resources. The new civic movements often recall an earlier era of local societies and mutualism. Many involve a broader range of social classes in their activism than do traditional CSOs.[20] The unfolding phase of movement-based activism is as much about the values of community as it is about issue-oriented advocacy.

These civic movements focus both on systemic demands and on policy-specific grievances. They span all regime types: there are movements that seek democracy in authoritarian settings, movements that have been triggered by a democratic decline, and civic activists who aim to address economic injustices. Technological advances and the spread of social media have contributed to new types of civic activism and, at the same time, altered the battlefield between democracies and autocracies.[21]

The formal structures that characterised formal civil society have given way not only to more nimble, responsive, and creative practices but also to more chaotic and, often, disruptive ones. In the early 2000s, the emergence of transnational collective action was seen as the most meaningful trend in civil society; in recent years, it is social movements rooted in national or subnational issues that are the most dynamic area of civic activism.[22] This new activism entails a growth in democracy-oriented civic initiatives and a proliferation of innovative forms of organisation and deliberation. It enlivens what is often referred to as “everyday democracy” in the periods between elections and other major political moments.

Into the mid-2020s, an even more intense new wave of civic movements seems to be gathering momentum. This wave is driven by concerns over climate change, the cost of living, wars, and human rights abuses and contributes to local community building. Across diverse contexts and issues, perhaps the most notable trend, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, has been the tendency for civil society to channel its grievances through new kinds of looser civic movements.

These movements have emerged, for example, in response to repression in Bangladesh, government attacks on gender rights in Argentina, and mismanaged flood responses in Spain.[23] Their tactics have ranged from sabotage and civil disobedience to grassroots campaigning.[24]

The civic movements have developed new kinds of strategies as they try to elude heightened repression. Autocratic leaders have increasingly cracked down on movements and protests with violence and brutality.[25] Illiberal leaders have attacked movements that represent vulnerable groups, such as the LGBTQ community, particularly transgender people, as well as immigrants and people of colour. Autocrats have stoked division, fear, and insecurity in an effort to dissolve the power of civic movements. Just as citizen-led initiatives have leveraged innovative institutional engagement, so too have governments that seek to repress civic movements.

Breaking boundaries: the rise of creative activism in Thailand

- Chuveath Dethdittharak, ActLab

Activism in Thailand has changed significantly in recent years. While it was once led primarily by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and formal organisations that focused on legal and policy reforms, it is now more decentralised, youth driven, and creatively expressive. New generations of activists are finding innovative ways to challenge authority, engage the public, and sustain their movements despite increasing obstacles.

Previously, civil society groups engaged in institutional advocacy, often working with government agencies and international donors through policy discussions and legal challenges. However, tightened restrictions, state surveillance, and funding cuts made traditional advocacy difficult.

Today, activism is more dynamic, digital, and community centred. Many movements use social media, decentralised organising, and cultural symbolism to mobilise support. Unlike traditional organisations that relied on formal legal mechanisms, today's activists use public-awareness campaigns, direct action, and creative strategies to engage a wide audience. Through pop culture, humour, and inclusive organising, they are keeping democratic engagement alive and accessible.

A divided or united civic sphere?

The emergence of informal civic actors has revitalised democracy and civic mobilisation across many countries. Yet, it has also raised questions about the relationship between these new forms of activism and more traditional types of civic organisation. As newer forms of activism have grown and become more influential, some tensions have emerged between the older and newer civic groups.[26] In many ways, they compete with one another.[27]

Many representatives of formal CSOs interviewed for this report expressed frustration with new movements for functioning in isolation and not cooperating with other civil society actors. In turn, the newer movements often accused more established CSOs of failing to recognise the importance and legitimacy of younger groups. One activist from Thailand told us: "Sometimes it feels that more established organisations behave as if they know more than us. Certainly, they have more experience, but it has still been grassroots movements that have managed to connect with the public and drive large-scale civic mobilisation."[28]

Informal groups from all countries in the study charged formal CSOs with being overly elitist and hoarding donor resources unfairly. Our interlocutors made a point of keeping clear of the big NGOs and political parties in order not to be associated with their increasingly problematic images. Besides, newer movements seemed to think of formal CSOs as being too conservative and trying to work within existing systems rather than pushing for necessary far-reaching shifts in political, social, environmental, and economic paradigms.

One activist from Georgia told us: "The forms of advocacy, oversight, and accountability mechanisms that CSOs use do not reflect the trends and dynamics in society; they are outdated and, at times, ineffective."[29] There is evidence that all these factors have become salient in many regions, from the Middle East to Europe, from Africa to Latin America. In some cases, those who lead new movements recoil from formal NGOs as a western notion of civil society that is not appropriate for their contexts: many larger NGOs have been caught up in the gathering de-colonial pushback against the development and human rights agendas.

Emerging activists were also strikingly suspicious that big NGOs and other formal CSOs were seeking to ride on the coat-tails of the new activism's greater legitimacy. They feared the prospect of large, well-funded NGOs swallowing up smaller and less powerful community movements and squeezing out their lifeblood under a discourse of partnership. Another interesting observation was the politicisation of formal CSOs. As an activist from Senegal told us, "in comparison to formal organisations, which can hardly avoid being politicised, informal movements have remained purely civic and citizen led, with no confusion [from] political parties. This has made the movements truly inclusive and appealing to Senegalese society as a whole."[30]

Some interlocutors from formal CSOs worried that issue-focused, professional advocacy could fragment if it got too close to the disruptive world of new civic activism. CSOs certainly felt on the defensive, as the new activism has become more influential and, in many countries, has seized the initiative from long-standing CSOs. The most established groups often dismissed the newer movements as lacking maturity and clear, practical objectives. Formal CSOs often sought to keep protests and other campaigns focused on specific objectives and complained that newer movements turned these into more disparate revolts of discontent not tied to precise aims. They complained that the newer movements were good at making a lot of noise and disruption but failed to engage in the laborious details of reforming concrete government policies.

From hierarchy to hashtags: the evolution of Belarusian activism in the digital age

- Marharyta Vorykhava, Office of Belarusian President-Elect Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya

Historically, activism in Belarus was characterised primarily by structured, institution-based approaches. These provided a means for dissent but were often constrained by hierarchical organisational models and state surveillance. In recent years, however, there has been a marked shift towards informal, digital activism. This shift allows a more decentralised, grassroots approach and is vividly illustrated by youth-led flash protests – spontaneous, short-lived demonstrations orchestrated through social media – that have been effective in both mobilising participants and evading state interference.

These flash protests are underpinned by robust digital infrastructures that allow activists to rapidly coordinate and adapt to changing circumstances – a dynamic that contrasts sharply with the slower, more cumbersome methods of traditional protest. Online forums have also emerged as virtual safe spaces for political debate and mobilisation. The use of digital tools has thus broadened the participation base, engaging segments of the population that might otherwise remain marginalised in traditional protest formats.

While these rivalries are real and concerning, the differences between formal and informal CSOs can easily be exaggerated. Other evidence suggests a more mixed picture and more cooperative patterns of interaction in recent years.

Our interlocutors were positive about some changes in the relationships between informal actors and more formalised CSOs. They noted that in some sense, their cooperation had become more mutually reinforcing, allowing them to reach out to different audiences.[31] For instance, respondents from Georgia stressed that individual activists and civic movements had proven to be the most successful in engaging younger audiences and Gen Z, while formal CSOs reached other parts of the population.[32] One Georgian activist told us:

> The working strategy that informal activists use is transformative, as it offers bottom-up democratic organisation and fosters solidarity between various groups. They attempt to embed the real needs, concerns, and political demands of local communities into the political agenda, triggering social and political change both for and with them. Small changes "here and now" are something that attracts the public and serves as a distinctive niche for civic movements and their activities.[33]

The members of our focus group revealed that they had begun to explore ways of nourishing each other in a mutually supportive fashion. In Belarus and Georgia, CSOs and newer social movements have formed alliances to fight stolen elections. Meanwhile in Nicaragua, Senegal, and Thailand, protest movements have started to look for connections to CSOs and, indeed, political parties, often softening their anti-politics absolutism. One Senegalese activist stressed how several grassroots leaders had become prominent political players in the 2024 elections. Many formal, professionalised CSOs have gradually adjusted and come to realise the importance of reaching out to community movements.

Reclaiming the streets: the rise of grassroots activism in Georgia

- Salome Shubladze, Social Justice Center

The latest wave of protests in Georgia is entirely grassroots, as they are self-organised and lack a central leader or organiser. Various groups, united by professional, neighbourhood, and other common interests, have successfully organised marches, performances, and other activities. In this process, it is evident that people are gaining ownership of the ongoing movements, and a truly new civil society is emerging.

This shift is significant because until now, civil society has been viewed more narrowly as comprising primarily institutionalised organisations funded by donors. While formal CSOs have provided legal assistance and litigation services to the new activists, the latter have been critical of the CSOs, especially for their work before the October 2024 parliamentary election.

Informal and formal civic actors often coordinate because they realise that they fulfil complementary functions. New movements can galvanise public and media attention; more established CSOs can then harness this energy and build onto it legal campaigns and political lobbying aimed at concrete policy changes. Tunisia and Turkey are good examples of countries where this incipient division of labour has been evident. Formal and informal groups – radical and less radical – sometimes come to work together with a "good cop, bad cop" strategy and thus maximise the chance of winning concessions from governments.

Nicaraguan interlocutors stressed that knowledge and experience of CSOs often empowered civic movements and helped them "define objectives [and] advocacy strategies and form an inclusive decision-making process within movements", which allowed emerging movements to achieve greater impact and consolidate.[34] Interviewees noted that formal CSOs had also played a role as "capacity builders, providing tools for better research, advocacy, strategic communication, and risk protection".[35]

CSOs have sometimes become involved in coordinating more disruptive forms of protest. Extensive empirical studies reveal that traditional NGOs, far from being irrelevant to innovative revolts, have sometimes been the key mobilisers of protests. Opposition parties and NGOs have helped trigger movement-based revolts in Georgia, Malaysia, Morocco, and Thailand. In turn, newer movements have come to recognise the value of old-style tactics like petitioning, letter writing, and membership rallies and the usefulness of links to political parties and trade unions.

In some cases, formal and informal civil society have overlapping personnel. Many activists involved in new movements also work for NGOs, even if they reject the idea of formal, institutionalised cooperation between the two spheres. Sometimes, the same individuals now lead the new activism by harnessing the internet and social media tools that amplify their campaigning. Informal and fluid citizen movements can end up feeding new activists into mainstream political parties and NGOs. Hong Kong and Ukraine stand as perhaps the most emblematic examples of these two-way personnel linkages between formal and informal civic politics.

In a small number of cases, new movements have changed their status into formal NGOs as they develop and seek stronger institutionalisation. Some new activist movements have worked to retain momentum after protests subside by establishing organisational structures, partly taking on board formal NGO models. Working in the opposite direction, some heavily formalised NGOs have looked to adopt some elements of informal movements as they try to be more nimble, more responsive, and better able to evade state repression.

Challenges for democracy support

These complexities and evolving trends present both challenges and opportunities for democracy-support strategies. Over the last decade, international democracy assistance has evolved to include a broader array of stakeholders, expand its geographic reach, and diversify the scope of aid recipients.[36] Several governments have updated their policies and priorities in support of democracy worldwide. While donors traditionally back innovative actions by civil society, their interventions are usually shaped by structures that cannot reach informal and innovative forms of activism. Donors invariably express enthusiasm for grassroots initiatives but lack mechanisms for direct engagement with them.

At the same time, informal civil society and emerging civic movements often express concerns and reluctance when it comes to external funding, fearing that it will "shape their agendas and priorities and challenge their ownership and independence".[37] While civil society representatives share the same values, our interlocutors questioned western-style democracy support for not considering alternative pathways to civic participation. These divergences have placed donors in a difficult position, often wanting to support democracy but unable to move beyond traditional policy templates.

One Senegalese activist told us:

> It seems donors sometimes attempt to tell us the orientation and priorities without considering the vision of the movement or local organisations. Therefore, I would strongly advocate "global envelopes" that are not tied to strict timelines or project-related funding. This would allow local organisations and activists to truly have ownership over their initiatives, granting them the liberty to make decisions, respond to unexpected political developments in their countries, and act without seeking formal approval from donors.[38]

Informal civil society and emerging civic actors feel particularly challenged by the financial and administrative requirements of traditional funding schemes. In contrast to the institutionalised NGO model, informal actors tend to be fluid, decentralised, and often explicitly political. Actions such as spontaneous protests, citizen-led initiatives, and social media campaigns aim more at having local and immediate resonance than at formalising themselves in traditional structures. This has challenged international donors, who fear that their engagement could result in the politicisation of assistance or appear to favour one side in contentious domestic issues.

Interlocutors working for democracy-support donors also referred to these political sensitivities. They noted that "the increasing protest activity and civic mobilisation has further put the spotlight on civic movements. Governments, fearing a loss of power, increasingly attack civic actors and try to delegitimise popular mobilisations by labelling them as orchestrated by foreign powers", as authorities increasingly view protest activity as a threat to regime change.[39]

One common reflection – stressed by democracy-support donors operating in countries that range from hostile, repressive autocracies to more open, pluralist hybrid regimes – is that the emergence of civic activism has resulted in more "stringent legal rules of the host country and mounting methods of pressure".[40] Some representatives of democracy-support donors emphasised that in some cases, they received enquiries from host governments about their programmes, including the recipients of their grants and other support. In Belarus and Georgia, politicians and senior government officials have openly called out donors, especially because of their support for civic movements.[41]

When discussing their work with informal civil society, our interlocutors referred to a dual challenge: on the one hand, ensuring accountability while still allowing informal groups and civic movements to remain the type of actors they are; and, on the other, addressing the difficulties of engaging with these groups. Interviewees described democracy support for informal groups and civic actors as "labour intensive". In many cases, such support requires enhanced monitoring and follow-up, given the limited capacity of aid recipients and the lack of organisational structures but the same reporting rules imposed by democracy-support donors.[42]

An increasingly common challenge was a lack of flexibility and readiness to adapt. We corroborated some of the complaints of civic movements with democracy-support donors and found that they were well aware of the challenges that informal groups and civic activists face. Yet, they pointed to the difficulties of adapting democracy-support practices flexibly given the accountability-related requirements. Our interlocutors referred in particular to "the need for accountability in spending taxpayers' money".[43]

Most interviewees also stressed their missions and mandates, emphasising the importance of aligning support with the political context of a particular country or region. Some interlocutors working for democracy-support donors noted that regardless of any willingness to be flexible, reporting and accountability requirements for democracy-support projects mean at least some degree of institutionalisation. This, at times, may affect the purpose or agility of informal groups, which is what makes them distinctive and generates wide support from society.

Many donors have begun to take more nuanced views of the limits of their approaches to date and explore new ways to support civil society. Democracy-support donors with more flexible mandates, such as the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) or the Prague Civil Society Centre (PCSC), have emerged to try to fill gaps in traditional democracy aid and foster unsupported pro-democracy actors.[44] These organisations were launched following criticisms of the democracy-assistance sector, including inflexible mandates, stringent accountability and reporting rules, and lengthy procedures. The success of these initiatives lies in their approach of building more solidarity rather than offering charity; as mentioned by one of our focus group participants, "we shouldn't be working for civil society, but we should be working with civil society".

These organisations considered the increasing diversification of the civil society sector and started to operate under flexible mandates by supporting individual activists, unregistered organisations, and civic movements. In recent years, many donors have recognised the need to rethink what

qualifies as democracy aid and sought to address the increasing demand for support beyond formal CSOs. Yet, this process is incomplete and slowed by institutional inertia, including in the search for consensus over how to adapt to an increasingly uncertain civic landscape. Donors have not only to change their ways of working but also to be much more open and experimental. This means being ready to accept that innovative approaches might lead to failures as well as successes and to focus on long-term outcomes.

Donors could focus more on delivering support through strategies that are as innovative as the target movements. One solution could be non-financial support: actions such as capacity building, leadership training, and the implementation of networking platforms could more concretely enable the growth of these movements. As a representative of a democracy-support funder suggested, "we are very much focused on impact and output, but what is often needed is a focus on wellbeing: sometimes just creating a safe space to talk is already a big step."

Finally, amid an increasingly challenging context for delivering democracy support, our interlocutors emphasised the urgency of revising the theory of change that underpins democracy assistance. A prominent theme raised by activists was the need to support so-called progressive forces in the face of rising illiberalism. Both civic movements and CSOs highlighted the importance of creating space for greater experimentation in these uncertain times and called for less emphasis on project-based deliverables.

Even if the immediate impact of democracy-support work is difficult to quantify, donors' focus on measurable accountability can be overly rigid. Donors such as the EED, the PCSC, and philanthropic foundations have demonstrated that it is possible to successfully combine flexible funding with accountability. Other democracy-support donors need to revisit the way they calculate risk. It is inherently risky to support new activism, but there are also risks involved in not engaging. If donors ignore these movements, they forego the opportunity for innovative change created by grassroots initiatives.

Democracy-support fusion

Given these difficulties in reaching out to informal civic movements, democracy organisations should aim to fuse support for formal and informal civil society within a single, holistic strategy. This approach would be in line with the emerging dynamics of coordination between formal CSOs and informal civic movements noted above. It would get around some of the problems of directly supporting civic movements and harness formal CSOs' potential as a bridge between donors and the new activism.

The new civic movements can be most effective when they work alongside formal CSOs and when donors enable this coordination. The new movements can boost each other without adopting the same modes of action or issue campaigns as each other. Our interlocutors from Senegal stressed that such cooperation can benefit both sides. Young activists need more knowledge of political processes in the country and expertise about how civil society has addressed similar problems in the past, particularly during political uprisings between 2012 and 2024. These activists require the experience of CSOs that have dealt with the same challenges before, rather than relying solely on spontaneous responses to political dynamics.[45]

The relationship between informal and formal civil society does not need to be entirely harmonious; indeed, it might gain from being positively competitive without being mutually damaging. Each group has particular strengths, and their combination seems to be most promising when they feed into each other's activities in a complementary fashion. Our interlocutors from Georgia noted that formalised CSOs have greater "expertise in providing legal aid, running advocacy campaigns, and applying best practices".[46] CSOs are also better placed for certain activities because of their infrastructure and resources. Meanwhile, activists have been more effective in reaching a wider public.

As a result, donors need to push CSOs to share these resources with activists to maximise their objectives. It seems that new civic activism helps correct at least some of the shortcomings of more established civil society activity; donors should not push it too far towards the old models of civil society – something that, arguably, they still tend to do. Perhaps one of the most encouraging trends is a blurring of the lines between formal and new informal civic actors in terms of personnel and strategies. Most of the young leaders of today's spontaneous movements have links with traditional NGOs, whose resources and know-how they leverage and complement with new ideas.

Donors can further help new movements to build networks with more traditional forms of direct organisation and action. They could also push traditional CSOs to engage with newer movements by deepening connections to grassroots communities and a wider net of citizens who are not politically engaged in a traditional sense. Donors should draw from the new activism as a means to help revive the legitimacy and representativeness of formal civil society.

Donors should support formal CSOs to fulfil novel functions as conduits between new activists and party politics. An increasing number of NGO representatives appear to accept the need to adopt this kind of bridge-building role in the future. They could be well placed to offer some kind of transmission belt between informal social movements and protests, on the one hand, and the formal institutional channels of representative democracy, on the other. Formal CSOs should redefine part of their rationale as being to provide backup support and services for frontline activists. They could usefully focus more systematically on how to help channel new movements' energy into other civil society and political avenues.

While destructive rivalry between formal and informal civil society needs to be avoided, it is also vital to escape the opposite danger of relations becoming too cosy. Some donors have arguably erred in implicitly pushing new movements towards NGO-isation. Nor should formal NGOs be enticed into thinking that only new-style informal activism has any value today: they certainly need to reinvent themselves and regain popular legitimacy, but this does not mean jettisoning all the benefits of formal structures and campaigning that they have developed over many years. With both formal and informal civic groups fearing that they will be co-opted by the other, donors can work to avoid this mushy fusing between the two styles, each of which plays a necessary role.

Donors' support for better pro-democracy coordination should be about formal and informal actors maximising their mutual complementarity. While the new civic activism should help CSOs to link downwards to fluid grassroots networks, NGOs should help the new activism to link upwards to more targeted and structured political processes.

At the same time, alongside such coordination, rivalry can be healthy. Formal and informal civic activists offer alternative routes to political and social influence. In some situations, the activities of new-style movements may be most appropriate, while in others, more formalised NGO campaigns may achieve more. The relative potential of each set of actors will depend on the issue at stake and the political context in which it is being pursued. With such a varied global context of policy challenges and political situations, citizens can benefit from having different types of civil society at their disposal.

Donors should adopt a dual approach to fostering an enabling environment for both formal and informal civil society actors. One activist noted: "You don't fund movements as they emerge. You have to build the infrastructure that will be there when movements emerge years down the road."[47] Informal movements often emerge spontaneously in response to crises and aim to provide immediate reactions to specific events. These movements typically do not intend to build long-term structures but rather respond to urgent needs as they arise. To effectively support such movements, donors should not only provide emergency assistance but also invest in building a resilient system that allows social movements to prosper over a longer period.[48]

Conclusion

The wave of new civic movements across the world is a potent and significant trend in global politics, but one that is underplayed in accounts of authoritarian dominance and democratic backsliding. Social movements have been influential for a long time but in the last several years have moved into a new phase of mobilisation and contestation. After an innovative, youth-led push, numerous NGOs have rebranded themselves through an emerging activism ethos that is far more participatory in terms of its decision-making and use of digital tools. Grassroots movements have grown and found ways to become more sustainable between protest waves.

There are some signs of a new united civic sphere and division of tasks. The new civic activism that has emerged across the world is unlikely to displace formal activism, while the latter cannot improve without incorporating and responding positively to the former. Many civic movements end up becoming more structured over time.

Meanwhile, structured organisations are increasingly inclined to involve new and dynamic engagement techniques in their activities, following the new movements. Emulating the participatory spirit of grassroots activism, NGOs are learning to open their networks to a broader set of actors. Arguably, the pertinent division is not between new activists and established NGOs but between those in both groups who try innovatively to link different spheres of political engagement and those who are not willing to explore such bold rethinking.

International support can play a helpful role in fostering the new phase of civic movements and promoting cooperation among them. It could encourage dialogue and alliances around a united civic sphere. Partnerships between exciting new civic movements and established CSOs can build bridges by giving new activists access to resources and expertise without requiring rigid institutional models that constrain them. Such an approach also demands that donors be more flexible in their funding mechanisms, including pooled funds and simplified reporting requirements that are better fitted to the realities of grassroots activism.

The future of international support for informal civil society will depend on whether donors strike a balance between engagement and autonomy, structure and spontaneity, and, more generally, tradition and innovation. By adapting their efforts to the diverse and dynamic realities of contemporary activism, donors can help unlock the full potential of informal civil society and foster a more inclusive and participatory global civic sphere. The road ahead will be undoubtedly fraught with difficulties, but it is a journey well worth taking – for democracy, for justice, and for the enduring power of collective action.

Notes

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