

## Policy Paper



# Cooperating With Political Parties – Why Does It Matter?



# Contents

## **Policy Paper** – Cooperating With Political Parties – Why Does It Matter?

**03** WHY POLITICAL PARTIES MATTER

---

**03** SHRINKING SPACES FOR POLITICAL PARTIES

---

**04** EU COOPERATION WITH POLITICAL PARTIES

---

**05** WORKING WITH POLITICAL PARTIES:  
NO ONE FITS ALL SOLUTION

---

**06** ABOUT ENoP

---

## WHY POLITICAL PARTIES MATTER

Political parties are a cornerstone of representative democracy and serve a function like no other institution. Democratic political parties contest and seek to win elections in order to govern and manage government institutions. They offer alternative public policy proposals which are shaped by citizens' preferences.

Political parties – through their candidates running for elections – provide citizens with political options to select their preferred party and candidate.

In democracies, political parties ensure that elections are genuine expressions of the people's will. Furthermore, they perform essential functions in between elections.

They are a vital connecting link between state and society at national and particularly at local level. They carry out a political leadership role a modern democracy cannot function without. As much as citizens' initiatives

and social movements are necessary for political innovation, opposition and criticism, ultimately, they depend very much on the parties and elected representatives who carry the responsibility to translate their demands into actual legislative proposals.

When not part of the governing party (coalition), democratic parties provide a constructive and critical opposition by presenting themselves as the alternative government voters may wish to choose – thus pressuring the incumbents to be more responsive to the public's interests.

The expression of conflicting views can actually help to create a better understanding of the issues and to identify solutions. Outside election periods, democratic parties also offer citizens opportunities to participate in political life and encourage active links between citizens and those who represent them.

## SHRINKING SPACES FOR POLITICAL PARTIES

Around the world the space for democracy and free expression is shrinking. In 2018 the Economist Intelligence Unit reported a decline in its democracy index for 89 countries, while only 27 improved.

The shrinking of democratic spaces through authoritarian policies affects all actors trying to improve democratic processes. Political parties (mostly those in opposition) are particularly vulnerable to such policies especially in country contexts where an enabling democratic, legal and financial framework for political parties is lacking.

An increasing number of countries are enacting laws that are intended to make the involvement of opposition parties in the political process impossible or at least burdensome. Just take the recent examples of Tanzania and Cambodia:

### Case of Chadema, Tanzania

On February 2019, an amendment to the Political Parties Act was passed in Tanzania, representing the most severe changes to political parties since the re-establishment of the multiparty system. This amendment empowers a person appointed directly by the President to intervene in intra-party nomination processes to exclude individual party members from all political work or demand any information from a party or party leader. In addition, all cooperation of persons or organisations with political parties will depend on the permission of that person. Finally, foreigners are no longer allowed to participate in a party's decision-making process.

### Case of the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), Cambodia

The amendment to Article 18 of the Law on Political Parties that describes that a party must fill a vacant position of a party leader within 90 days, in combination with a new amendment that states that political parties will be dissolved if their leaders are convicted of domestic crimes, were rightly seen as an attack on the opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). The amended law forced Sam Rainsy, former president of the CNRP, to resign on 11 February 2017 given that he has many politically motivated pending cases registered against him in Cambodia and has lived in exile since 2015. The CNRP had been planning to hold its new Congress to elect a new leader in 2018, but this would now be deemed too late.

Furthermore, the amendment to Article 44 states that the Supreme Court can disband any political party which "causes separation, sabotages democracy, undermines the state's security, creates forces, incites people to national disharmony and is manipulated by foreign governments or political parties" and can ban political leaders from the disbanded parties from politics for five years.

These amendments targeting the main Cambodian opposition party included a series of repressive laws which have since been enacted. Namely, the Law on Associations and NGOs (LANGO), the Trade Union Law, and the Telecommunications Law. Human rights defenders and civil society organisations are subjected to notorious judicial harassment. The arrest of leader Kem Sokha (still under house arrest today), Vice President of the CNRP, over allegations of treason for conspiring with the United States to oust Hun Sen was another serious repressive step taken by the government.

Generally, in many developing and democratising countries, political parties (especially opposition parties) are often not able to fully play their role in the democratic process, to aggregate the citizens' interests, to provide political choices, develop policies and implement them, to engage citizens in the democratic process, to advance government accountability and to strengthen legislatures.

Either their financial basis is weak or no transparent legal and financial framework ensures the sustainable funding of parties to play their constitutional role effectively. The lack of an equal level playing field often extends to the unequal access of opposition parties to state and private media, the non-existence or weak implementation of parliamentary rules and to a lack of procedures providing opposition parties with their legislative rights (right to form a political fraction, right to appoint their spokesperson,

right to proportional speaking time in parliamentary sessions, right to investigate into government misconduct, etc.). To address these issues political foundations in many countries play a vital role to engage with the government and political parties to work towards improved capacities of parties and an enabling legal and financial framework for political parties to freely operate. However, in the current shrinking space context the level playing field for opposition parties and also for political foundations to work with political parties is coming even more under threat. The European Union has an important role to play not only to address these developments in their respective political dialogues with the concerned countries but to make political cooperation and cooperation with political parties a cornerstone of the external democracy support work.

## EU COOPERATION WITH POLITICAL PARTIES

There is a growing perception among practitioners and stakeholders also at European level that political parties play a crucial role in fostering home-grown democratic processes. Support for the development of viable, democratic and representative political parties is necessary not only to bring about a change towards a democratic political culture, but also to contribute to the success of other democracy support activities. Democratisation processes are rendered sustainable not only by relying on support to state institutions or civil society, but also when political parties are fully integrated in this process.

Equally, whilst the enforcement of civil society contributes to the consolidation of democracy, the rule of law and the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms, it cannot replace political actors (of which political parties are a constituent part).

Following the Arab Spring, the EU has strengthened its engagement with political parties due to the crucial and multiple roles they play in fostering a democratic system. The EU has engaged with political parties that share democratic values, based on a nonpartisan approach and indirectly, through training, platforms for dialogue and other capacity-development activities. Support was often provided within broader electoral assistance projects or through support to parliaments. The EU has also

supported the introduction of legal or constitutional frameworks that empower democratic political parties and allow them to act as all-inclusive vehicles of representation. Recently, the EU is increasingly putting a stronger focus on political party support as a standalone item in the EU's comprehensive democracy support agenda, which is very much welcomed by political foundations.

In order to become a more visible actor in the field of political party support:

- the EU and the Member States should speak with one voice and strongly condemn the oppression of concerned political parties in third countries and address the issues at stake in their regular Human Rights (HR) Dialogues
- should coordinate their efforts on the ground in close cooperation with political foundations and other democracy support actors, develop joint assessments of the party system and the state of political parties and coordinate to engage with political parties (e.g. closer cooperation between political foundations and the EU Delegations / EUDs)
- should jointly develop action plans (where joint progress is agreed on the support of political parties.) Nevertheless, such an approach should not be only demand-driven but include clear benchmarks set by the EU.

## WORKING WITH POLITICAL PARTIES: NO ONE FITS ALL SOLUTION

While political foundations can establish certain basic rules and requirements to cooperate with political parties across the world, the final decision why to or not to cooperate with a certain party in the end always underlies an ongoing, experiencebased assessment. Political foundations assess their (choices of) partners carefully, based on democratic principles as well as on shared values and trusted relationships. However, it lies in the inherent nature of politics, and particularly pluralistic systems, that political foundations operate in dynamic political environments. Parties that seem to be sharing the same values and principles in one or more legislative period might no longer do so in the upcoming one. Continuous monitoring, assessment and dialogue with the partners is therefore indispensable. Hence, cooperating with political parties always contains a certain political risk.

In order to decide on engagement approaches with political actors a critical assessment of the operational environment (administrative, legal, political, financial, judicial) in which political parties operate is a precondition to understand the challenges of political parties to operate in a given context. Such an assessment needs to include the following guiding questions:

- In which party system does a party operate in: a one-party / autocracy / multiparty system?
- At which level do political parties (especially opposition parties) have access to financial resources and how can the state of political pluralism be described in the country?
- Is there an enabling environment for political parties to express their programmes and their positions (equal access to media) freely?
- Is there an enabling environment for political foundations and other democracy support actors to execute their activities with political parties freely, without being labelled as foreign agents?
- How is the relationship of the given party with the EU and other international partners?

This assessment is a core prerequisite for political foundations guiding them in their decisions to engage with political parties.

Furthermore, there are criteria that are commonly shared across political foundations, irrespective which ideology they are close to. These are used as a basic reference and orientation for considering the political foundations' engagement with political parties.

- Non-extremist ideology
- Exclusion of the application of violence to achieve political objectives
- Declaration of / belief in democracy, rule of law, respect for and protection of human rights, principles of sustainable development, gender equality and respect for minority rights
- The existence and application of internal democratic rules and procedures
- Programmatic substance of the party, including a defined set of principles and goals
- Societal anchoring and the link to the constituency
- The will to have an impact on political and social development

While the first and the second criteria can be seen as strictly applied by political foundations, the level and quality of inner-democratic procedures and programmatic substance very much vary across parties in the different regions. Therefore those criteria are non-exclusive but rather help the political foundations to categorize political parties in order to define suitable cooperation approaches.

Once a political foundation has decided to start the cooperation with a party, different cooperation approaches are applied depending on the individual country context as well as on the identified needs of a party.<sup>1</sup>

Political party foundations associated with well-established political parties in EU countries, engage in **peer-to-peer cooperation** where they identify ideologically likeminded parties. 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. Moving away from ad hoc technical assistance, peer-to-peer support establishes long-term relationships with like-minded partner parties. 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.

However, not always can political foundations identify an ideologically affiliated partner party with whom it develops longstanding relations based on common ideological roots. Therefore, other cooperation approaches are applied such as:

**Multiparty approaches/dialogue** aiming at discussing rather not sensitive issues shared or well accepted across the political parties, e.g. basic human rights principles, basic principles of gender equality. While facing a challenge of selecting the parties for the dialogue, this approach allows establishing a primary channel of interparty dialogue in the country, which could be used further for more specific party cooperation and democracy support actions. Multiparty approaches are also necessary when the government is keen to reform political party legislation. All relevant political parties should take part in such reform dialogues. If the political environment is characterised by polarisation political foundations can play an important role to moderate such reform processes in the respective countries.

**All-party technical assistance** relies, similarly to the multiparty dialogue, on different political parties being able and willing to communicate (or even cooperate) with each other. The idea is that one organisation provides equal support to all political parties included in that specific programme, therefore equally building their capacities to operate democratically. The challenge of this approach is that already well-established and thus equipped parties receive the same support as younger parties that have more basic needs.

Both single- and multi-party cooperation have their advantages when it comes to working with political parties in a given country context. The peer-to-peer party cooperation, for instance, implies close and long-term partnerships that generally provide opportunities for more significant impact on the strengthening of the internal organisation and political profile of the respective party. In addition, there are also examples of multi-party cooperation projects that focus on developing and strengthening pluralistic democratic party systems in countries where single-party cooperation is impossible or makes little sense.

Political parties recognise the critical role of political foundations as trusted partners in the often challenging domain of democratisation processes. Their commitment to party cooperation oftentimes provides political foundations with additional influence on the development and strengthening of democratic institutions, the rule of law and political governance in the countries concerned.

## ABOUT ENoP

The European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP) serves as a platform for dialogue and exchange between the European political foundations, civil society organisations, active in the fields of democracy support and sustainable development, and the institutions of the European Union.

ENoP brings together 55 member foundations from 22 EU Member States and the United Kingdom. The members are affiliated to 6 political party families represented in the European Parliament, namely: ECR, EPP, Greens/EFA, GUE/NGL, Renew Europe and S&D. Our members are active in over 100 countries around the world, where they bring civic education, support democratic processes and sustainable development through work with civil society and political actors.

In 2016, ENoP has signed a Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) with the European Commission, acknowledging the important role of the Network in the fields of development cooperation and democracy support. This FPA marks a set of common objectives of a Strategic Partnership to:



**Promote an enabling environment for political foundations, civil society and political parties;**



**Encourage participation in policy-making processes through political foundations, their partner organizations and political parties;**



**Strengthen the capabilities of political foundations in promoting democracy and developing pluralistic societies.**

**ENoP**  
EUROPEAN NETWORK OF  
POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS

*European Network  
of Political Foundations*  
Rue de l'Industrie 42  
B – 1040 Bruxelles

 [info@enop.eu](mailto:info@enop.eu)

 +32 2 23 000 29

 [www.enop.eu](http://www.enop.eu)



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

This publication was co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the European Network of Political Foundations and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.