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Chapter 14

European Civil Society: The Empirical Reality in the Multi-Level System of the EU

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The Spell of Civil Society

Democracy cannot survive without democrats. Based on this cliché, a strong revival of Tocquevillean approaches can be noticed in the last decade. The obvious limitations and weaknesses of institutionalized, representative democracy – mainly limiting the role of citizens to voters – should be overcome by a much broader idea of democratic decision-making by expanding the way decisions are taken and by including civil society in these newly conceptualized processes. Instead of interest representation, democracy's main emphasis should be on deliberation and involvement. Authors such as Benjamin Barber (1984 and 1995) presented the main arguments for this shift already in the 1980s. Barber firmly rejects liberal "thin democracy" or "politics as zookeeping". Instead, a "strong democracy" is needed, which "requires unmediated self-government by an engaged citizenry" (Barber 1984: 261). Its main characteristic is "the politics of

amateurs, where every man is compelled to encounter every other man without the intermediary of expertise" (1984: 152). Among others, Stephen Shalom unambiguously has made clear what the arguments behind those claims are:

> "We want a political system that doesn't just produce results that benefit us, but one in which we participate in the decisions that affect our lives. Why? Because self-management makes us more fully human. Politics is not just a means of attaining our ends but is also a means of defining who we are and hence what our ends are."[1]

The advantages of this approach are evident: the conventional fallacies of defining democratic decision-making and participation in status-quo oriented or in institutional terms are avoided. Voluntary associations are presumed to play a major role by providing opportunities for the development of skills, competences and values, on the one hand, and a vehicle for organized involvement and interest articulation, on the other. Especially the civil society concept appears to be very useful in these discussions: civil society "… occupies the middle ground between government and the private sectors" and is characterised as being "… public without being coercive, voluntary without being privatized" (Barber 1995: 281). The concept is closely linked to social capital, but has a different background.[2]

Recent debates about the problems and prospects of improving the democratic aspects of European decision-making processes are clearly

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[1] See http://www.zmag.org/shalompol.htm visited on July 30, 2007. See Kohler-Koch (2007) for various concepts of democracy and EU governance.
[2] "Civil society is primarily the province of political theorists and area comparativists, whose main concerns are normative commitments to democracy and the re-creation of a participatory community after years of authoritarian suppression. Social capital is more the language of rational choice, which is concerned foremost with coordination and cooperation issues as they enhance or detract from equilibrium solutions, in this case voluntary participation in civic organizations and democratic endeavors. Norms and trust are important considerations, but the social capital idea concentrates on personal benefits and strategic calculations" (Bielasiak 2000: 976). For an overview from the perspective of European governance see Smismans (2006a) and the extensive overview by Finke (2007).

influenced by the rise of deliberative concepts of democracy and civil society. Remarkably, these debates were hardly based on demands from grass-root organisations or citizens, but highly stimulated by initiatives from the European Commission to deal with a so-called 'democratic deficit'.[3] As early as 2000, Commissioner Romano Prodi told the European Parliament that in his vision EU decision-making processes "… called for a civic participation in all stages of the policymaking process".[4] In its famous White Paper on Governance (COM 2001) the Commission expanded this line of reasoning. Besides, the arguments to strengthen the role of civil society significantly in order to develop a European civil society were explicitly presented. In this view, EU decision-making processes are to be made more open, transparent, and participatory by mobilizing and integrating a wide range of groups at all levels of the rapidly expanding EU multi-level system; that is, by mobilizing civil society. This can be obtained if citizens can be brought "… closer to the European Union and its institutions and to encourage them to engage more frequently with its institutions … [and] to stimulate initiatives by bodies engaged in the promotion of active and participatory citizenship" (JO C 100, 4.2.2004: 30/7-37/8). As Michalowitz notes, the Commission demands a certain "inner democracy" including the idealistic expectation that civil society organisations "… themselves follow the principles of good governance" (2004: 152).

With its White Paper the Commission evidently stimulated the emerging consensus that civil society will compensate for the assumed deficiencies of democratic decision-making within the EU. In this discussion paper, the empirical evidence for this expectation is briefly examined from the

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[3] The term "legitimacy deficits" might be more appropriate. See Føllesdal (2006), Mair (2005), or Greenwood (2007), as well as the contributions to Kohler-Koch and Rittberger (2007) for overviews.
[4] As cited by Sloat (2003: 130). See for a concise overview of the expectations and demands Eising (2000) or more recently Friedrich (2007) and Finke (2007).

perspective of citizens and voluntary associations. Are citizens willing to become more involved in European affairs? Do civil society associations promote the spread and articulation of citizens' demands and expectations and do they stimulate engagement in European affairs? And do these associations provide the 'missing link' between European decision-making processes, on the one hand, and individual citizens in the EU multi-level system, on the other? On the basis of the answers to these questions, the prospects for democratic governance provided by civil society associations will be tentatively assessed.

Citizens and Europe

The attitudes of citizens towards Europe, European unification and the EU have been widely studied in the last decades. Empirical research in this area is concentrated on affective attitudes (support and confidence). In general, support for European integration especially increases with higher levels of education and socio-economic status of citizens (cf. Inglehart et al. 1987). Furthermore, substantive cross-national differences, as well as clear regional differences within member states can be noted (cf. Steenbergen and Jones 2002, Schmidberger 1997 or Eichenberg and Dalton 2007). A rapidly increasing number of analyses attribute these findings to factors such as cost-benefit evaluations, value change, cognitive mobilisation, socio-economic resources, religious orientations, and specific historical and cultural circumstances (cf. Hooghe and Marks 2007). There is no need to add additional confirmation of these finding here. Especially the low and declining levels of electoral turnout for the European Parliament have been documented extensively.[5] Besides, in the last two decades, European citizens

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[5] See for a general overview of research on European attitudes Niedermayer and Sinnott (1995); for European elections and voting behaviour see van der Eijk, Franklin et al. (1996), Marsh, Mikhaylov, Schmitt (2007), or van der Brug and van der Eijk (2007).

increasingly have rejected the idea that membership of their country in the EU is "a good thing".[6] Since we want to compare attitudes towards Europe with similar attitudes towards other objects, different indicators are selected here. Empirical information will be summarised for a few basic political orientations of citizens: political interest, political confidence, political attachment, and political knowledge. Results are taken from the "Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy" project (CID), carried out among the citizenries in several European countries.[7] The countries selected here are the EU member states Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

A first indicator of the attitudes of citizens towards Europe is the level of interest or involvement in European politics compared to other political objects. For this attitude a straightforward question with a simple rating scale is used: "How interested are you personally in each of the following areas: local politics, national politics, European politics, and international politics". Besides, a similar question is used for "politics in general". A common-sense expectation is that a monotonous relationship exists between people's interest and the closeness of the political area: the closer the political area, the more relevant it will be for the daily life of citizens, and the higher the level of interest will be. This expectation is corroborated by empirical evidence. As can be seen in Figure 1 the average levels of political interest indeed decline when we move from local to national, and from national to international politics. However, the deviant case is European politics, which is the least

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[6] Straightforward indicators of affective orientations towards the EU are widely used in empirical research in this area. See Eichenberg and Dalton (2007) or Scheuer and van der Brug (2007) for overviews and discussions.

[7] The network 'Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy' (CID) was funded by the European Science Foundation; see: www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/projekte/cid or van Deth, Montero, Westholm (2007) for further information. Data can be obtained from the Zentral Archiv in Cologne (Study number 4492; http://info1.za.gesis.org/ DBKSearch12/ SDesc2.asp? no=4492&search=CID&search2=&db=E).

interesting area. The average level of interest in European politics is clearly lower than political interest in general and much lower than interest in local or national politics.

Confidence in various political institutions is a second indicator of the attitudes of citizens towards political objects. The respondents are confronted with a list of institutions such as the courts, the cabinet, or civil service, and the question is: "Please tell me how strongly you personally trust each of these institutions". Figure 2 confirms the notion that especially institutions which are not clearly related to party politics (municipal boards and courts) obtain relatively high levels of confidence. Not surprisingly, we find parties and politicians at the lowest end of the list. What is remarkable, however, is the position of the EU between parliament and parties with a rather low level of confidence. Apparently, citizens do not perceive the EU as an institution as trustworthy as the UN, but (dis)trust the EU in the way they trust party-political institutions such as parliaments and parties. Although the general level of confidence in the various institutions mentioned is not very high, the EU even reaches an average score far below the midpoint of the scale offered to the respondents.

A third indicator for the attitudes of citizens towards Europe is the feeling of attachment towards their environment, varying from their neighbourhood or village to Europe or "the world". For this indicator, too, a straightforward question and a rating scale are used. The average levels of attachment are summarized in Figure 3. Apparently, people feel strongly attached to their country, whereas their municipality, neighbourhood, and region all obtain somewhat lower and more or less similar scores. Once again we see that Europe attains a remarkable position at the far end of the scale. On average, people do not feel much attached to Europe – even "the world" attracts higher levels of attachment than Europe does! Besides, it is clear that the

largest 'attachment gap' exists between feelings of attachment towards people's own country and towards Europe.[8]

Finally, a cognitive indicator for citizens' attitudes towards Europe is used by asking each respondent to mention the number of member states of the EU at the moment of our surveys (1999-2001). The answers to this question vary between one and 97 member states. If we consider only responses provided by at least one percent of the respondents, the range is limited to eight and 20 member states. As can be seen in Figure 4 more than 35 percent of the respondents know the correct answer (15 member states). Apparently, many people still think that the Union consists of 12 members – a constellation which ended with the entry of Austria, Sweden, and Finland in 1995. Substantive numbers of respondents express as their opinion that the EU has 11, 13, 14, or 16 member states, although the Union never had a corresponding membership of that size. Almost exactly half of the respondents estimate that the EU has less than 15 member states. With respect to the intensive public debates about the enlargement of the EU in the 1990s, these figures show a rather low level of cognition of basic aspects of the EU among European citizens.

Together, the results for the four indicators present a rather disappointing picture with low levels of interest, confidence, attachment, and knowledge. The good news, however, is that only a tiny minority of the citizenries is characterized by low scores on each of the four indicators used.[9] Only three percent of the respondents combine an evident lack of interest in European affairs with very low levels of confidence in the EU and attachment to

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[8] Very similar findings based on analyses of Eurobarometer 62 are presented by Noll und Scheuer (2006)

[9] Low scores are defined here as follows: political interest: not very + not at all interested; political confidence and political attachment: score lower or equal 4 on scales from 0-10; knowledge: number mentioned not equal to 15.

Europe, and with a lack of basic knowledge about the Union. The not-so-good news is that less than 13 percent of the respondents do not have an exceptional low score on any one of the four indicators used. In other words: almost nine out of ten Europeans show an exceptional low score on at least one of the four crucial attitudes towards Europe.

The simple descriptive results presented here should be considered with caution. Much more sophisticated analyses are required to obtain accurate estimations of the various attitudes towards Europe and the EU. Besides, possible explanations of these results are not even touched upon here. Yet, the general message from these finding is unambiguous: large parts of the European citizenries are not interested in European affairs, have no confidence in the EU, do not feel themselves attached to Europe, and do not have basic information about the EU. It is the relatively unfavourable position that Europe and the EU obtain in comparisons with other political objects that makes these results so worrisome. In an opinion climate like this it will be difficult to attain ambitious goals of more citizen engagement in EU affairs.[10] The Commission's quest to bring citizens "… closer to the European Union" or to stimulate participation in European decision-making processes seems to be very far away from the empirical realities among European citizens.

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[10] In addition it is clear that growing divergences between EU policies and policy expectations among citizens strengthen this lack of support for European integration (cf. Eichenberg and Dalton 2007: 145-6).

Figure 1: Interest in politics at various levels (means 1-4, reversed scales)
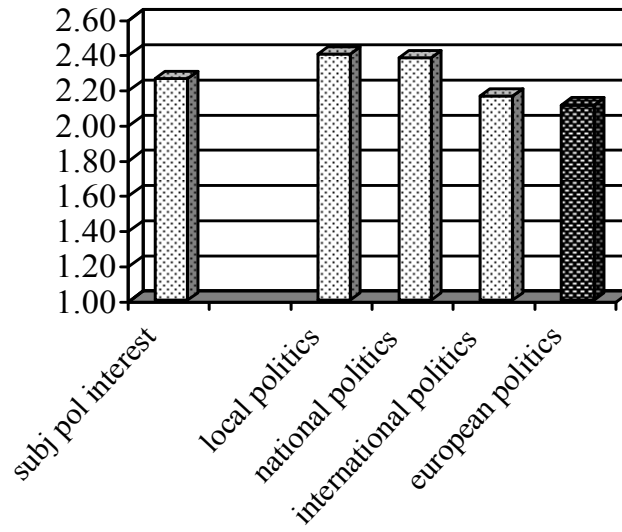

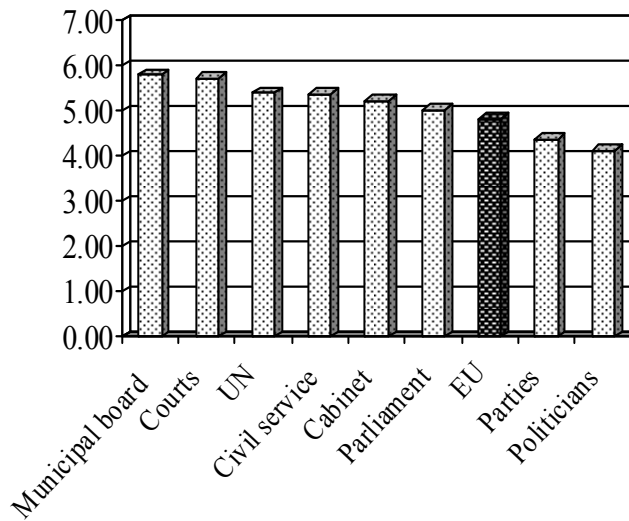**Figure 2: Confidence in political institutions (means 0-10)**

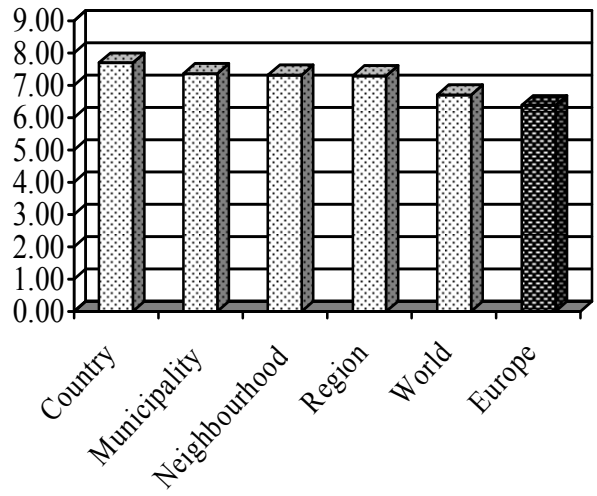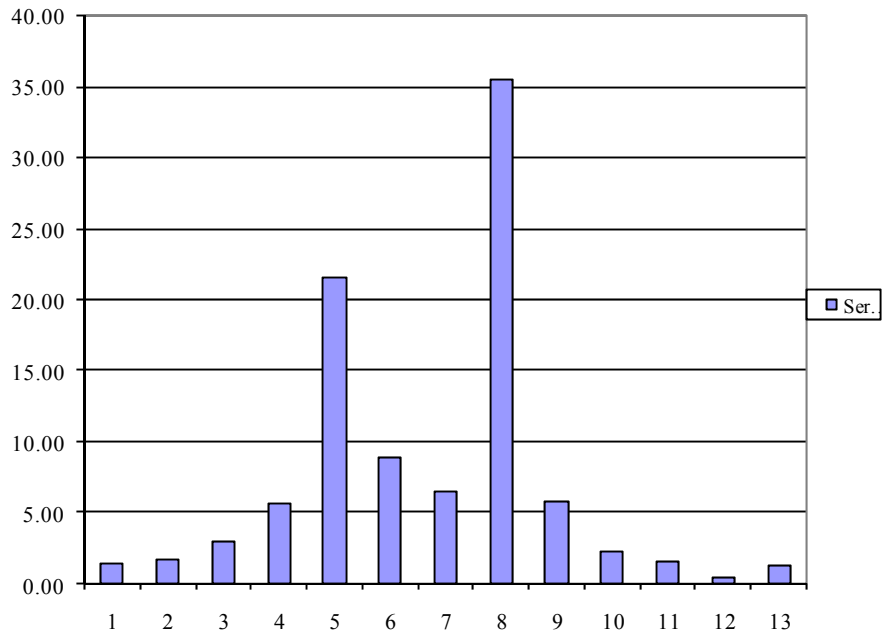**Figure 3: Attachments towards various objects (means 0–10)**

Figure 4: Estimated Number of EU Member States (Frequency Distribution)

The Roles of Civil Society Associations

Schools of Democracy?

The Commission did not rely only on the willingness of citizens to participate in European affairs in order to improve democratic decision-making. From the beginning, civil society organisations were presumed to play an important role in the Commission's approach. Do civil society associations promote the spread and articulation of citizens' demands and expectations and do they stimulate engagement in European affairs? Answers to these questions can be broadly categorized on the basis of role of civil society associations as either being vehicles for the mobilisation of citizens and to develop "active and participatory citizenship", or as being intermediaries or representatives of specific interests in the decision-making process.[11] Both roles do not exclude each other and many associations will naturally combine the two.

A bottom-up flow of engagement in European affairs is likely to emerge when people involved in local voluntary associations in general are more positively oriented towards the EU than other citizens are. In that case, mobilizing these grass-root organisations implies an increased level of engagement in EU affairs by a part of the population that is already relatively interested, informed, and attached to Europe. However, if people who are active in local voluntary associations are not characterized by those relatively positive attitudes towards the EU, mobilizing these organisations as part of a 'European civil society' will strengthen Euro-scepticism and the lack of

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[11] See Finke (2007) for an extensive overview of the various conceptions of the relationships between civil society, society, and the state in research on civil society participation in Europe. Vibert (2007: 138-43) presents a very interesting discussion about "fundamental failures" resulting from an "incompatability" of existing power-sharing arrangements in the EU and the role of civil society associations.

engagement already typical for many people in Europe. The crucial question, then, is whether members of local voluntary associations differ in their attitudes towards Europe from the population in general.

Empirical information about European attitudes among members of local voluntary associations is rare and especially opportunities to compare the attitudes of these members with those of non-members are exceptional.[12] Most research seems to focus on the various ways associations can be involved in European affairs by gaining a "European dimension" (Sánchez-Salgado 2007). As part of the CID-Project, members of voluntary associations in various European cities were approached with similar questionnaires as used for the population samples.[13] First analyses of these data for Aberdeen and Mannheim allow for conclusions about the specific characteristics of members of local voluntary associations (cf. van Deth and Maloney 2008a; Maloney, van Deth and Rossteutscher 2007). From these analyses it is clear that attitudes towards Europe are very similar to the findings presented in the previous section; that is, members of local voluntary associations in general are not very interested in European politics, are not very committed to Europe, and do not show much confidence in the EU. In fact, many of these orientations seem to be somewhat less positive towards Europe than can be found among the general population. Only the average level of confidence in the EU appears to be somewhat higher among members of voluntary associations than among non-members. Although the low level of pro-European attitudes among members probably is a consequence of the fact that – almost by definition – people engaged in local associations are especially

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[12] Van den Berg (2006) presents a highly original study of the ways Dutch voluntary associations enable their members to (further) develop attitudes towards Europe, but does not focus on local organisations.

[13] Respondents are not passive members, nor members who enjoy the specific activities of these organisations only, but are selected from the active members; that is, from the members who participate in organisational and managerial tasks of the organisation as volunteers. For convenience, the term 'member' is used here for these activists and volunteers.

motivated by local considerations, it is clear that by mobilizing local organisations Euro-scepticism is strengthened. In other words, the invitation of the Commission to participate more in European affairs will not be met with much enthusiasm by members of local civil society organisations. In fact, the proposal seems to underestimate the obvious risk that strengthening the role of civil society associations in European decision-making processes might, consequently, be in vein or might even mobilise opposition and obstruction.

These findings about the attitudes of members of voluntary associations challenge the presumed positive impact of civil society associations for democratic decision-making as presented by (neo-) Tocquevilleans. This conclusion is not restricted to European governance and the exact nature of the impact of civil society on democracy is still disputed (cf. Jordan and Maloney 2007: 171-92). From an extensive overview of the literature Theiss-Morse and Hibbing conclude that "Good citizens need to learn that democracy is messy, inefficient, and conflict-ridden. Voluntary associations do not teach these lessons" (2005: 227). Armony (2004) goes even further by speaking of "The Dubious Link" when referring to the relationship between "Civic engagement and democratization". Less fundamental criticism has been provided by empirical researchers challenging straightforward Tocquevillean interpretations that do not seem to be relevant for European democracies in particular (cf. Gabriel et al. 2002; van Deth, Montero, Westholm 2007). These findings all undermine the credibility of the basic assumption that civil society associations are 'schools of democracy' which contribute to the development of citizenship, engagement, and participation. The specific findings for attitudes towards Europe among members of local voluntary associations seem to corroborate this more general conclusion once again.

Intermediaries and Representatives?

Civil society associations might not have a benevolent impact on the attitudes of their members, but they can, of course, establish the 'missing link' between European decision-making processes, on the one hand, and grass-root organisations in the EU multi-level system, on the other. Do they provide "… an intermediary infrastructure" which "support the articulation and bundling of societal interests"? (Kohler-Koch 2007: 265). As part of the CONNEX-project, the activities of Workpackage 1–3 focussed on the role and position of civil society associations within the multi-level system mentioned (cf. Maloney and van Deth 2008). The various contributions deal with empirical analyses of specific decision-making processes and include the attitudes towards Europe among members of local voluntary associations (van Deth and Maloney); the configuration of environmental movements in Belgium and Europe (Hooghe); involvement in discussions about the European Convention in Wales (Cook); the impact of the EU on public accountability in the UK, the Czech Republic, and Romania (Parau and Wittmeier Bains); the claim-making of migrants and the unemployed in Britain, France, Germany, and Switzerland (Chabanet and Giugni); the persistent non-Europeanization of domestic political spaces and the role of party elites (Leconte), outside lobbying strategies and tactics of interest groups (Mahoney), the impact of EU regulations on specific policy domains in seven countries (Adam, Jochum and Kriesi), and the EU's activities that have affected the development of civil society in the Baltic states (Stewart). These studies provide a wealth of detailed information about actual decision-making processes and their determinants, and it is not easy to summarize the results in a few more general statements. However, two conclusions can be formulated (cf. Maloney and van Deth 2008b).

First, civil society actors in the European multi-level system seem to be firmly integrated in nation-centred structures, acting largely on the basis of their national commitments. It is difficult to uncover any evidence of a massive proliferation of a 'European civil society'. Besides, there is a strong tendency towards professionalized organized interests and an increasing professionalization of existing groups. European civil society as such hardly exists – instead new configurations of nation-specific interest representation and intermediation seem to arise continuously.

A second conclusion refers to the actual role of these professionalized elites in civil society associations. As various empirical analyses show, party elites and association elites play a key gatekeeper role and by doing so sustain the specific interests they represent in the European multi-level system. This conclusion appears to be valid irrespective of whether we deal with political parties, interest groups, lobby groups, or social movements. Although differences between policy areas and different countries can be noted, it is clear that nation-specific interests remain the most important determinants of civil society involvement in European decision-making processes. Even explicit attempts to reach civil society with specific EU-policies appear to have been unsuccessful or have enjoyed limited success only (Maloney and van Deth 2008b).

This depiction of the role and position of civil society associations in Europe is neither new nor unique. For instance, Sudbery (2003: 93-94) presented similar conclusions underlying the fact that people in charge of civil society associations perceive their primary role as influencing policy – involving supporters is seen as "desirable" and frustrated by several barriers.[14] Besides,

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[14] Although mainly focussing on British voluntary associations Jordan and Maloney (2007) provide strong evidence for exactly this kind of reasoning among elites of professionalized associations.

the gap between the expected benevolent consequences of deliberation as supported by the Commission and the actual development of civil society seems to be highly problematic. Van den Berg points to the fact that only political parties seem to be functioning as mediums for information about European integration – all other voluntary associations are more or less irrelevant for attitudes about Europe among their members (2006: 108). On the basis of an extensive case study, Smismans speaks about "the participatory myth" and warns that participation by civil society actors in "new modes of governance shows (still) important shortcomings" (2006b: 19). With a nice sense of understatement Friedrich remarks: "It seems as if the participatory infrastructure has not kept up with the pace of the participatory discourse" (2007: 19). Recently, Greenwood summarized the findings about the role and position of civil society associations in Europe as follows:

> "Any reality check would show that almost all the EU groups are associations of organizations (in the citizen field almost entirely associations of national or other European associations), and therefore unable to deliver on many of the traditional strengths for interest groups in democratic systems [...] EU groups are political action organizations, not service based organizations, because their members – often national associations, or in the corporate world sometimes large companies – do not need member services" (2007: 347).

In Conclusion

The rapidly expanding European multi-level system of governance should be accompanied by a corresponding expansion of democratic decision-making processes. The Commission strongly urges for a much more prominent role of civil society associations in order to strengthen the ties between citizens and the EU and to improve the articulation of interests and demands at

various levels. Apparently, the lack of democratic legitimacy of the Commission as an "unelected body" (Vibert 2007) is to be rescued by the activities of civil society associations – which are usually not democratically legitimized either. In this way, the 'distance' between citizens and decision makers should be reduced considerably, while the process becomes more open, transparent, and participatory. However, a much less rosy picture arises from a "reality check" (Greenwood) of these ambitious goals and expectations.

Survey data provide a rich source to test whether the high hopes in the emergence of a European civil society meet reality. Though the data present a multi-coloured and complex picture, some general trends are easily discernible even from a few straightforward descriptive statistics. In general, citizens are not very interested in European politics, do not have much confidence in the EU, do not feel themselves attached to Europe, and are not very-well informed about the EU. Similar findings about national politics and national political institutions belong to the standard results of empirical research. The remarkable feature of the results for European affairs, then, is not that these attitudes as such are very exceptional – remarkable is the fact that these European attitudes consistently are even less positive than attitudes towards other political objects. This finding might be used to underline the urgent need for actions to improve the attitudes towards the EU among citizens. Yet it is clear that the general opinion climate makes it very difficult to reach the average citizen and to convince him or her to become more involved in European affairs.

Considering this less positive opinion climate among citizenries in Europe, focussing on a specific part of the population in order to improve attitudes towards Europe could be a clever move. Form this perspective, the proposal

of the Commission to offer civil society associations a much more prominent role in decision-making processes is certainly justifiable. Empirically, the expectations about the benevolent consequences of these organisations for democratic decision-making are not materialized. A bottom-up flow of engagement is unlikely to emerge because attitudes towards Europe and the EU are relatively weak particularly among those citizens who are active in voluntary associations at the local level. Attempts to involve local civil society groups in EU governance might, consequently, be in vein or might even mobilise opposition and obstruction. These findings are compatible with more general doubts about (neo-) Tocquevillean approaches.

If citizens do not have strong attitudes towards Europe and members in voluntary associations do not deviate from the general population in this sense, the third and last opportunity to rescue the expectation of positive impacts of civil society for democracy is to look at the role and position of these organisations in the European system of multi-level governance. Here, too, the results do not offer much reason for optimistic conclusions. As it turns out, professionalized association elites are playing a key gatekeeper role. Furthermore, the nation-specific character of these associations and their interests is evident.

Measures aiming at more "participatory citizenship" and a much more prominent role of civil society associations seem to be based on a rather unrealistic picture of the political orientations of citizens and the role and position of voluntary associations in democracy. Besides, the deviant position of the EU in the patterns of political attitudes of citizens is not taken into account. Especially the ambitious plans of the Commission appear to be based on a combination of an overestimation of the willingness of citizens to get involved in voluntary associations and politics, on the one hand, and an underestimation of the dynamics of group decision-making processes, on the

other. This combination of false perceptions and presumptions will effectively block attempts to improve attitudes towards Europe among citizens and might even be counterproductive. The empirical reality of the European civil society, then, does not leave much room for optimistic (or idealistic) conclusions about the opportunities to improve democratic decision-making processes by increasing the role of civil society.[15] Much needed is a more critical approach of civil society associations and their elites as well as a "regulated model of participatory governance" (Friedrich 2007: 19).

Disappointing as these conclusions might be, there is certainly no need to condemn civil society associations or to claim that they should not play an important role in democratic decision-making processes. As Kohler-Koch points out: "Though they may not bring about democracy enhancing effects that have been attributed to associations by De Tocqueville, they nevertheless can function as agenda setters and provide a counterbalance to state and economic actors" (2007: 265). Furthermore, empirical analyses of claims presented by associations show more positive attitudes towards European integration than found among activists (Della Porta and Caiani 2007). Associations do not, however, function as 'schools of democracy' or intermediaries for citizens in the European multi-level system of governance. Only when that conclusion is accepted, discussions about the proper role and position of civil society associations in democracy can be moved beyond the phase of over-ambitious expectations and ambitions.

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[15] That is, of course, not to say that deliberation as such cannot have positive consequences for citizenship and democracy (cf. van Deth 2007). See Searing et al. (2007) for a recent empirical analysis of these relationships and D browska (2007) for a detailed case study. An extensive overview of measures to improve democracy in Europe is provided by Schmitter and Trechsel (2004).

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