

## Afghanistan: August 2021 - A tentative reassessment of cultural foreign policy and civil society support

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# Afghanistan: August 2021

## *A tentative reassessment of cultural foreign policy and civil society support*

Asiem El Difraoui with Caspar Berges

The images shocked the world. After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the scenes at Kabul International Airport captured chaos and desperation. Thousands of panicked Afghans trying to flee the country. Crowds clinging to accelerating planes. US military pilots taking off, letting humans fall hundreds of meters to their death. Tens of thousands of people left behind.

In Europe, there was an immediate and understandable outcry: How could Europeans abandon members of civil society with whom they had worked for two decades to create a democratic Afghanistan? The events on the Hindu Kush are truly historical and world changing. Their dimension and consequences cannot yet be fully assessed, but, as the renowned German political scientist Herfried Münkler phrased it in quite dramatic terms, “*since then nothing is like it was before*”.<sup>1</sup> What seems clear already is that the “West” – including Europe – suffered a considerable credibility loss on the global stage. Numerous voices in this so-called Western world have likewise called into question the entire agenda in Afghanistan – not least the attempt to build an Afghan civil society on Western terms. To cite Münkler once again, “*Afghanistan is the beginning of the end of a Western global idea of a world order that can be described as based on ‘values and the orientation of norms’*”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Münkler, Herfried. (2021). Eine Weltordnung ohne Hüter: Afghanistan als globale Zäsur. In: *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, Jg. 66, Nr. 10, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

The events in Afghanistan and the bleak picture evoked by Münkler, among others, clearly prompt a major interrogation of the terms of foreign cultural policy. In the last months, artists, media workers, teachers, activists – to name only a few groups who were working with and partly trained by Western organizations, including many Europeans – have fled the country in fear of their life or gone into hiding. Why were their hopes raised over 20 years? Did it make sense to try to help civil society through foreign cultural policies, if everything that was built seems to collapse like a house of cards? Should there be a major reorientation of cultural foreign policy and support to civil society and, if so, in what direction? Were there also activities that changed Afghan society positively and will have enduring impact? This short paper cannot provide definite answers but aims to give some preliminary indications on lessons to be learned, on challenges ahead, and on what might be done to address them.

Our findings and proposals are based on assessment of the relevant literature, close monitoring of current events in Afghanistan, and – most importantly – on around a dozen interviews with relevant Afghan and European actors, as well as a panel discussion with members and experts of Afghan civil society.<sup>3</sup>

## Civil society, cultural foreign policy, and the scope of interventions

At this juncture, it seems necessary to provide a working definition for the concepts of civil society and of foreign cultural policy. The dominant European notion of civil society as being composed of all forms of non-state organizations – be they NGOs, associations, foundations, or religious groups – who participate in public life to foster democratic ideals, seems far too narrow to be applied to many other regions of the world. Firstly, such organizations are in many countries very weak or non-existent. Secondly, many organizations and individuals do not adhere to ideals of Western democracy. Both these factors clearly apply to Afghanistan with its multi-ethnic population of nearly 40 million Afghans.<sup>4</sup>

A broader understanding of civil society is required. Namely, an understanding that includes all primarily non-state and non-market actors that strive for what they perceive as the common good. The definition of the common good is complex. Beyond the universal needs for shelter, food, and security – that are the subject of classical humanitarian aid and not the focus of this paper – there are some main areas where civil society around the world seems to share basic objectives: the rule of law, a certain degree of social justice and of government accountability, forms of public participation, education, and different forms of self-expression.

European foreign cultural foreign policy as a classical soft power tool focuses mainly on the last two areas – education and various forms of self-expression. The underlying theory supposes that activities in these two fields have an indirect or direct bearing on social justice and equality, as well as on popular participation, and can thus help to reduce conflicts within a country, as well

<sup>3</sup> Élan - ideas for Europe. (2021, 21.11.2021). *Europe's debacle in Afghanistan [Video]*. With the panellists:

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Rahmatullah Amiri - (Research Coordinator with The Liaison Office (TLO)/ Freelance Consultant)

Tareq Sydiq - (Lecturer - Center for Conflict Studies, University of Marburg)

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PvOMfOVYto&t=25s>

<sup>4</sup> Afghanistan's 40 million inhabitants are an ethnic mosaic; in addition to Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazara and Uzbeks, there are also members of smaller peoples, such as Aimaks (4 per cent), Turkmen (3-4 per cent), Baluch (2 per cent), Nuristani and numerous other ethnic groups (4 per cent).

as tensions on an international level, for example through intercultural dialogues that include interfaith dialogues.

But cultural foreign policy can equally be a self-centred tool with which states try to promote their political and economic interests through the export of cultural goods. Sometimes, this occurs in a quite spectacular manner like France's flagship project of the Louvre Abu Dhabi. At worst, foreign cultural policy is state-sponsored political propaganda. Here Russian, Turkish and Chinese cultural foreign policies are examples. The latter two will be discussed at the end of this paper.

The scope of civil society support is a crucial issue, always closely intertwined with both security and political circumstances. The security situation determines the extent to which support and cooperation is feasible. Likewise, cultural foreign policy should have from the outset very clear objectives, in line with political priorities that are in turn determined by the geo-strategic and general political importance attributed to different countries. Taking all the variables into account, five different, frequently overlapping, categories of activity can be identified:

1. Activities that are nearly exclusively conducted from outside the country because it is characterized by an extremely hostile political and/or security environment. Actions addressed to civil society inside the country are mainly undertaken through classical media (in the German case, Deutsche Welle television and radio) and social media. Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover is, to-date, an example of this category.
2. Small-scale targeted activities inside the country that are consciously directed at a limited number of civil society members and are combined with outside activities. The aim is to empower a small number of people or small groups of people through scholarships, cultural exchange, selected local training or schooling. Here, Sudan provides an example.
3. Medium-scale activities that function in a similar manner to the category above but that also include the creation or financing of entire schools and universities in countries which have secure but authoritarian environments, and where European support is only welcome for its financial and technical impact but not in terms of normative aims. This is, for example, the case in Egypt.
4. Large-scale transformation support to create representative governments in countries that have a relatively strong tradition of statehood. These actions are imposed either by the international community, as in Bosnia, or by the will of the people, like in Tunisia. Support covers all domains of culture and education.
5. State-building or even nation-building in failed states with challenging security environments. Here all the available instruments of cultural diplomacy are deployed a minimum of security is in place. Afghanistan from 2002 to 2021 is a key example.

In all five categories assistance to the diaspora is provided in various degrees. The case of the Afghan diaspora will be discussed later in this paper.

## German cultural foreign policy in Afghanistan

The aims of the American led intervention in Afghanistan were initially unclear: to destroy Al-Qaeda and/or topple the Taliban, or to pursue fully-fledged state- and nation-building. After a short period, the latter goal was adopted and North American and European support deployed to build civil society on nothing less than the example of Western democracies. In 2002, Western countries, including Germany, rolled out several instruments at their disposal. From 2016 onwards, the presence and scope of intervention was reduced, mainly due to security concerns, culminating in a total retreat from on the ground activity in August 2021.

Twenty years of German engagement in Afghanistan from 2011 to August 2021 generated a total military expenditure of 12.3 billion euros. The German Foreign Ministry spent 2.46 billion euros on project-related personnel and material costs. The Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) spent 2.46 billion euros and the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture 33 million euros.<sup>5</sup> As these figures show, military expenses were overwhelming in comparison to those spent on development aid. Figures for foreign cultural diplomacy efforts are difficult to specify, since the funding comes from a wide variety of German public budgets, across both federal ministries and ministries of individual federal states.

Here follows a summary of the activities of the main agents of German cultural foreign policy, based on their own reports.

The German cultural institute, the Goethe-Institut, was reopened in Kabul in 2003 and deployed its traditional two-pillar strategy.<sup>6</sup> The first pillar consisted of German language classes that apparently had a high number of participants. In 2006, the institute proudly announced that its language training had reached a high number “*of multipliers and future decision makers, and with that [would] bind the current and future elite linguistically to Germany*”.<sup>7</sup> The second pillar consists of what the institute calls cultural program work. The Goethe-Institut hosted many events for different art forms: film, photography, performing, and fine arts. The institute sponsored the translation of German children’s books into Dari and Pashto and the creation of libraries. A “space without fear” was provided to freely discuss internal Afghani matters. Afghan artists were trained and events and exchange programs organized to provide Afghans with “*a gateway to the world [...] and make them aware of cultural developments outside their country*”.<sup>8</sup> The institute promoted cultural dialogue and declared its goal to bring Afghans together to foster “*the exchange of ideas and thoughts and thus creativity*” and to “*provide a new line of thoughts and impulses, push back fundamentalist thought and thus, in the long run, strengthen realistic forces*”.<sup>9</sup> The Goethe-Institut in Kabul closed in 2017.

Between 2002 and the beginning of 2020, the German Academic Exchange Service, DAAD, sponsored 100 PhD students and nearly 1000 Masters-level students from all disciplines to study at German universities. By 2021, a total of 633 Afghans were supported with DAAD

<sup>5</sup> Deutscher Bundestag. (2021, 04.10.2021). *Drucksache, 19/32123*. Retrieved from <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/19/326/1932643.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Winkler, R. (2007). Deutsche Auswärtige Kultur- und Bildungspolitik: Das Goethe-Institut in Kabul, In: *Die politische Meinung*, KAS, Nr. 453/7. Retrieved from [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=1692ce1a-f5f8-8652-b116-07c8fcd01e20&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=1692ce1a-f5f8-8652-b116-07c8fcd01e20&groupId=252038)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

scholarships. Additionally, the German Academic Exchange Service supported around 240 teaching and research projects of German institutions of higher learning with Afghan partner institutions. One example highlighted by DAAD is the “National Atlas of Afghanistan”. Published in 2014, the atlas provided for the first time reliable and scientific information about the country’s resources, infrastructure, nature, and culture. The DAAD also offers help and residencies for Afghan artists. After the fall of Kabul, DAAD recommended the swift creation and expansion of programmes and initiatives for students and researchers.<sup>10</sup> Firstly, the extension of support for Afghan students and researchers in neighbouring countries and the wider region, for example in Uzbekistan and Turkey. Secondly, “the extension of assistance to Afghan students who are in particular danger” with transit to, and a safe haven in, Germany. Thirdly, with an optimistic long-term view: the development of “leadership” programmes to prepare the young Afghan generation for a “post-Taliban” era. Fourthly, the continuation and enlargement of successful and well-proven programmes for the integration of refugees into German institutions of higher learning, including help for their families. The expansion of DAAD support in the above-mentioned fields is already partially underway.<sup>11</sup>

The Deutsche Welle, DW-TV, Radio and website (dw.com) is another important actor of German foreign cultural policy. Since 1970, DW Radio broadcasts 30 minutes in Dari and Pashto on shortwave. In 2002, DW added broadcast through an FM transmitter in Kabul and an Afghan partner station. Additionally, from 2002 until 2007, DW-TV broadcasted a 12-minute news programme in Dari and Pashto through Radio Television Afghanistan. In 2019, the shortwave transmissions were interrupted as DW TV started a 30-minute weekly programme in Dari and Pashto, broadcast by a local partner network. In 2020, a weekly bilingual TV talk show was added. After the Taliban takeover in September, DW revived its shortwave transmissions on top of the TV programme.

Three political foundations affiliated to Germany’s major political parties were also present in Afghanistan. Though these foundations do not, in other countries, operate as main actors of foreign cultural policy in terms of civil society support, and rather aim to represent the positions of their respective parties, each foundation was oriented towards civil society support in Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup>

An office of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, the political foundation affiliated to the Green Party, was established in Kabul in 2002. It focused on its main objectives, namely political education, and the promotion of democracy with the following three priorities: 1. traditional society and democracy, 2. traditional society and women’s rights, 3. women’s political participation. The foundation put an emphasis on marginalized regions of south-east Afghanistan like the three Pashtun-dominated provinces Paktia, Paktika and Khost. Here, Heinrich Böll partnered with

<sup>10</sup> DAAD. (2021, 30.08.2021). *Nach Ende der Evakuierungen: Afghanistans Studierenden und Forschenden beistehen*. Retrieved from <https://www.daad.de/de/der-daad/kommunikation/publikationen/presse/pressemitteilungen/afghanistan/>

<sup>11</sup> DAAD. (2019, 19.11.2019). *Ausbau der Stipendienprogramme: Mehr Hilfe für Afghanistan*. Retrieved from <https://www.daad.de/de/der-daad/kommunikation/publikationen/presse/pressemitteilungen/mehr-hilfe-afghanistan/>

<sup>12</sup> The concept of German political foundations is quite unique. Seven political foundations are funded by the German government on a long-term basis proportionally to their election results. Each of them is attached to party in the German Bundestag: the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (SPD), the Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung (FDP), the Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung (CSU), the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (CDU) and the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (Die Linke) and the Desiderius-Erasmus Foundation (AfD). The foundations are bound to the principles of liberal democracy and basic principles of solidarity. They support international development, based on democratic standards and the rule of law.

the Swiss Peace Foundation in the creation of the Tribal Liaison Office (TLO).<sup>13</sup> In an Afghan environment where parallel legal structures like the Pashtunwali, the traditional Pashtun law and honour code, coexisted with parallel political structures like tribal leadership and some institutions of the weak Afghan state, the project aimed “*at the integration of traditional tribal structures into the political process, the dialogue with the central government and international actors*”.<sup>14</sup> It was hoped that the ensuing stabilization of the security situation would open a pathway to increasing international aid, better infrastructure, healthcare, access to education and thereby also a long-term improvement in human and women’s rights. Due to the precarious security situation, the Heinrich Böll Foundation moved its office direction to Berlin in 2021 and continued working with ground forces in Kabul.<sup>15</sup>

The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), the foundation affiliated to the German Social Democratic Party, was also present in Afghanistan from 2002. Its work focused on topics that had strategic relevance for the stabilisation of democracy, the rule of law, conflict resolution and the transformation, as well as participation, of civil society actors in the political, social, and economic development of Afghanistan. The FES states that these actors were especially “*young societally-progressive actors, Afghan media workers and trade unionists*”.<sup>16</sup> The FES thus wanted to promote the capacity building of reform-oriented forces. The FES was also trying to strengthen dialogue with neighbouring regional actors from Pakistan, India, from Central Asia, and Iran in terms of security and economic relations. The office direction stopped their permanent presence in Kabul 2019 and closed the entire office completely with the fall of Kabul in August 2021.<sup>17,18</sup>

The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), the foundation affiliated to the conservative Christian Democratic Party (CDU), initially had three main objectives in Afghanistan: the training of journalists for state TV to foster independent journalistic coverage, assistance to universities in terms of raising research and teaching standards, and the training of young Afghan diplomats in the areas of political education and peace and conflict research. As the security situation deteriorated, KAS shifted its focus in 2018 to initiating and moderating track 1.5 and track 2 discussions in the field of religious and human rights with different conflict parties and with Afghan women. Track 1.5 dialogues bring together a mix of non-governmental actors and government officials, who participate in an unofficial capacity. Track 2 diplomacy brings together unofficial actors from different sides without government participation. The director of the Afghanistan office, Dr. Ellinor Zeino, who stayed in Kabul until mid-August 2021,

<sup>13</sup> Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. (2008, 15.05.2008). *Schwerpunkte der Arbeit in Afghanistan: Traditionelle Gesellschaften und Demokratie*. Retrieved from <https://www.boell.de/de/navigation/asien-3368.html>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Gebauer, M., Nassauer, O. (2012, 08.10.2012). *Sicherheitslage in Afghanistan: Böll-Stiftung zieht Direktorin aus Kabul ab*. Spiegel Online. Retrieved from <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/afghanistan-boell-stiftung-zieht-direktorin-aus-kabul-ab-a-860018.html>

<sup>16</sup> FES. (n.d.). *Die Aktivitäten der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Afghanistan*. Retrieved from [https://www.fes.de/referat-asien-und-pazifik/afghanistan?tx\\_digbib\\_digbibpublicationlist%5BpageIndex%5D=14&cHash=670f42c96752ab0b02578cd6e39a9114](https://www.fes.de/referat-asien-und-pazifik/afghanistan?tx_digbib_digbibpublicationlist%5BpageIndex%5D=14&cHash=670f42c96752ab0b02578cd6e39a9114)

<sup>17</sup>FES. (2021, 13.08.2021). *Gewalt und Verzweiflung lässt vielen nur die Flucht*. Retrieved from <https://www.fes.de/themenportal-flucht-migration-integration/artikelseite-flucht-migration-integration/gewalt-und-verzweiflung-laesst-vielen-nur-die-flucht>

<sup>18</sup> FES. (2021, 13.09.2021). *Die Gewalt gegen Protestierende und afghanische Journalist\_innen nimmt zu*. Retrieved from <https://www.fes.de/themenportal-flucht-migration-integration/artikelseite-flucht-migration-integration/die-gewalt-gegen-protestierende-und-afghanische-journalist-innen-nimmt-zu>



explained that these dialogues set out to include all conflict parties, including the Taliban: “we did not want to talk only with people of the same convictions”.<sup>19</sup>

## The Taliban takeover - what went wrong?

The two fundamental mistakes in the Western intervention in Afghanistan were political. The first mistake was to commit, after an initial period of unclear agenda, to fully-fledged state and even nation-building in a country where the state was always weak and the population conservative and fiercely committed to its independence. The latter was already proven by the defeat of two superpowers: the British Empire (19th Century) and the Soviet Union (1989). The second major mistake was to exclude an extremely conservative religious and nationalist movement - the Taliban - from the political and state-building processes. As the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai stated, the Taliban should have been included already at the 2001 Bonn Conference, which lay the ground for the state-building effort.<sup>20</sup> The Taliban at this point were militarily weak and ready to negotiate. But the US government categorically refused and pursued its “war on terror”. It is certainly very difficult to negotiate with people who have a totally different mindset and who in some cases, as the anthropologist Scott Atran writes, possess: “sacred values – values that may be religious or secular, such as God or country, but that are always non-negotiable, meaning they cannot be abandoned or exchanged for material gain”.<sup>21</sup> Often, however, a minimal consensus – for example, of non-violence – can be established, even with groups that hold these “sacred values”. There are important examples of interaction with jihadists that induced them to renounce violence and become productive members of society.<sup>22</sup> This is especially possible with groups – like the Taliban – who pursue mainly local or national political agendas, but nearly impossible if the groups have no real political agenda and rather adhere to messianic global salvation myths, as is the case with hardcore IS supporters and leaders.

Mistakes in terms of foreign cultural policy and aid to civil society followed in some ways as the logical consequences of the political mistakes in Afghanistan, where a Western-style democracy was meant to be imposed on a traditional, religious and multi-ethnic society. As Dr. Ellinor Zeino puts it: “For 20 years we preached to the Afghans to take greater self-responsibility but at the same time we told them how to do it”.<sup>23</sup> For many Afghans, this observation rang true, especially in terms of women’s rights. A female participant in the panel discussion stressed that the Soviet Union’s promotion of women’s rights during its occupation of Afghanistan was perceived as communist propaganda in the traditional Afghan society and the promotion of these rights by Western governments was not perceived more favourably: “Since these values were framed as Western, it is necessary for the Taliban to get rid of them in the process of ending what was perceived

<sup>19</sup> Personal interview of the author with Dr. Ellinor Zeino (25.11.2021).

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview of the author with Christoph Reuter (25.11.2021).

<sup>21</sup> Spinney, L. (2021, 24. September). Mismatch of mindsets: why the Taliban won in Afghanistan. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/24/mismatch-of-mindsets-why-the-taliban-won-in-afghanistan>

<sup>22</sup> Fitzgerald, M., Badi, E. (2020). The Limits of Reconciliation: Assessing the revisions of the Libyan Islamic fighting group (LIFG). *Institute for Integrated Transitions*. Retrieved from <https://ifit-transitions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ASSESSING-THE-REVISIONS-OF-THE-LIBYAN-ISLAMIC-FIGHTING-GROUP-LIFG.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Deutsche Atlantische Gesellschaft e.V. (2021, 29.07.2021). *Afghanistan steht vor geostrategischem Umbruch*. Atlantic Talk Podcast (27). Retrieved from [https://ata-dag.de/podcast/atlantic-talk/zeino\\_ellinor/13634/](https://ata-dag.de/podcast/atlantic-talk/zeino_ellinor/13634/)



*– and not only by the Taliban – as a foreign occupation. The Western framing is one of the biggest hindrances to deeply and sustainably ingraining these concepts in Afghan society”.*<sup>24</sup>

Other lessons to be learned from Afghanistan are not very surprising. For decades, NGOs and social scientists have, for example, stressed that help to civil society should not concentrate on urban areas or on an already somehow Westernized intelligentsia but rather put a real focus on rural and other marginalised regions and on communities beyond the “usual suspects”. Extremists around the world have often recruited in marginalised rural areas. This is particularly true in Afghanistan, where the Taliban significantly advanced their following in the countryside, but also in other marginalised regions of the globe where extremists were able to seduce disenfranchised youth, for example in southern Tunisia or the Sahel. *“In the mindset of the Americans in 2001 they thought: “we won”! There is no opposition left, and there is not going to be an opposition. The only remaining question was how much money do we want to spend? And how to invest that best [...]. They did not think in decades and of the benefits an investment could have 20 years down the line. By the time they finally discovered that they needed to go to the rural areas, the cost for doing so went up dramatically because the Taliban already had a presence there”, and “the Taliban took over the rural areas because they provide security and a very simple but functioning juridical system”.*<sup>25</sup>

As mentioned above, the Heinrich Böll Stiftung did run an outreach programme in Pashtun rural areas, albeit mainly through local staff for security reasons. An outlier in wider foreign cultural policy activities, the programme continues to show some positive effects as some of its former employees are still in contact with all relevant actors, including the Taliban, and ready to return to work in the Pashtun areas.

As in many other countries, the broad bias to the urban elites did not reflect political realities: *“Generally, there is a danger in the project of democracy promotion in partner countries that groups and tendencies (currents) are strengthened (overvalued) from the outside without having the corresponding significance within society, creating distortion of the political landscape and of the social fabric”.*<sup>26</sup>

“Monetization” of support was perceived by the panellists as another major problem, whether in terms of elite-driven politics in urban centres or in the rare projects in the rural areas. Projects created an opportunistic relationship to generate income but did not promote long-term self-reliance and self-empowerment: Civil society support *“was not achieving its ends but was mostly a money-making machine for a lot of guys. A lot of institutions just invented a project, and it did not matter if it worked because the only real end was to get funds and get money. [...] For example, everything was project-based. [...] If there was funding, there was activity. If the West funded more - more activity. If funding stopped, there was no activity anymore”.*<sup>27</sup> The rare instances of support in rural areas were also subject to criticism: *“there was work done, but it led to misallocation and*

<sup>24</sup> Élan - ideas for Europe. (2021, 21.11.2021). *Europe's debacle in Afghanistan [Video]*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PvOMfOVYto&t=25s>

<sup>25</sup> Élan - ideas for Europe. (2021, 21.11.2021). *Europe's debacle in Afghanistan [Video]*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PvOMfOVYto&t=25s>

<sup>26</sup> Mlodoch, K., Enste, G. (2004, 02.11.2004). *Ansätze zur Evaluierung der Projekte von swisspeace (SFS) zur Förderung von Zivilgesellschaft und Demokratisierung in Afghanistan am Beispiel der „Tribal Liaison Offices“ Paktia/Paktika/Khost*. Retrieved from

[https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/assets/boell.de/images/download\\_de/weltweit/evaluierung\\_swisspeace\\_2004.pdf](https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/assets/boell.de/images/download_de/weltweit/evaluierung_swisspeace_2004.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Élan - ideas for Europe. (2021, 21.11.2021). *Europe's debacle in Afghanistan [Video]*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PvOMfOVYto&t=25s>

*corruption. The elders took everything for themselves, and the funds destroyed the traditional societal structure. [The result was] fake events and a growing number of elders, since everybody wanted to profit and get their hands on the funds”.*<sup>28</sup> The monetization of support was perceived as having negative effects on communities: *“traditionally, communities came together to achieve something for the public good. For example, cleaning a village centre. Once the West proposed to pay, this stopped and that destroyed, to some extent, the traditional Afghan culture”.*<sup>29</sup>

Civil society actors in Afghanistan also exhibited strong mistrust of Western organizations concerning the durability of their support and their long-term commitment, making them reluctant to engage if there was no immediate financial gain. Remarks heard frequently by the author of this paper in Iraq in the vein of *“why should we work with you when you will go in a few years, and leave us to the vengeance of extremists”* also resonate for Afghanistan. This mistrust was amplified, as the former head of a German aid agency put it, by the public discourse of European and German politicians. In a bid to reassure their own constituents, they frequently stated that the Afghanistan engagement would be time limited. Other actors like the Aga Khan Foundation sent positive signals of commitment by leasing their offices in Kabul for 99 years and were thus deemed more trustworthy.

In general, small-scale projects that were well embedded in the local social fabric and that demonstrated some immediate utility for the population were the most successful. As the German council that advises the government on civil crisis prevention diplomatically writes: *“Complex and ambitious projects that had economic development, a change of behaviour and the building of institutional capacity as aims were more rarely successful.”*<sup>30</sup> To put it more bluntly, it seems clear, that imposed Western-style state-building has failed and the underlying theory of change should be replaced with more modest aims of gradual improvement in terms of the six previously mentioned areas where civil society around the world seems to share basic objectives: the rule of law, a certain degree of social justice and of government accountability, forms of public participation, education, and different forms of self-expression and accordingly of resilience and self-empowerment in challenging environments.

## Reasons for hope?

In view of the country’s dire situation and political uncertainty, Afghanistan might, at worst, once again be engulfed in an all-out civil war. At best, Afghans might be ruled by a Taliban regime that models itself somehow on the Wahhabi Saudi Arabia before the authoritarian reforms of Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman. It is very difficult to provide an outlook for civil society, but reasons for modest hopes do exist. Clearly, Afghanistan is not the country it was 20 years ago, before the Western intervention and associated cultural foreign policy evolved civil society. The predominantly urban civil society is probably one of the biggest challenges to

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Beirat der Bundesregierung Zivile Krisenprävention und Friedensförderung. (2021). *Stellungnahme: Wirkungsevaluierung der deutschen zivilen und militärischen Beiträge zum multinationalen Afghanistan Engagement 2001 –2021, Empfehlungen des Beirats der Bundesregierung Zivile Krisenprävention und Friedensförderung*. Retrieved from [https://beirat-zivile-krisenpraevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Stellungnahme\\_Wirkungsevaluierung\\_Afghanistan\\_Beirat\\_Zivile\\_Krisenpraevention\\_2021\\_11\\_05.pdf](https://beirat-zivile-krisenpraevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Stellungnahme_Wirkungsevaluierung_Afghanistan_Beirat_Zivile_Krisenpraevention_2021_11_05.pdf)

Taliban rule. Around a million Afghan students attended universities.<sup>31</sup> Women in the still highly patriarchal society had access to education and were present in all professional fields. Courageous women-led protests have already shown that Afghan society has resolutely changed. As one panellist stressed, *“the Taliban already experienced in the 90s that it is difficult to govern without women as civil servants”*.<sup>32</sup> Today, they have an even greater need for women’s participation in the running of the country, in view of spectacular population growth. Though exact figures are extremely difficult to obtain, the Afghan population almost doubled from 20 million in 2001 to nearly 40 million in 2021. According to this same panellist, there will consequently need to be some kind of “trade-off” between ideological convictions and effective governance, even if this leads to internal tension among different factions of the movement.

As another speaker at the panel discussion underlined, the training of journalists and media development still bear fruit under very difficult circumstances: *“Citizen journalism, citizens doing ground reporting even without institutional support”*. Afghanistan is in the digital age, with *“private people doing great work on blogs or on YouTube.”* Likewise, the public voicing of dissent still seems possible: the respected Afghan university professor Faizullah Jalal, who has for years criticised different Afghan governments during debates on Afghanistan’s most popular television, has not spared the Taliban.<sup>33</sup> On Tolo News, he severely criticised the Taliban regarding the country’s security and economic situation and went as far as calling the Taliban spokesman present a “calf”, an Afghan expression for stupid. The clip went viral on social networks. The professor was briefly arrested in January for insulting behaviours but released after two days without further charges. If the Taliban want to avoid a humanitarian disaster and further poverty, they are dependent on well-trained Afghan women and men to run the country. Civil society maintains some bargaining power. Just how much remains to be seen, especially as the Taliban seem poised to push some of their reactionary social agenda, especially in terms of women’s rights.

At the end of November, the Taliban issued guidelines that banned the broadcast of series featuring women and ordered female news journalists and presenters to wear headscarves.

## What can be done today?

Before discussing current possibilities to help Afghan civil society in terms of foreign cultural policy, the absolute priority is the *“moral imperative of preventing death through starvation ... if people don’t have food and don’t have healthcare then there will be no civil society”*.<sup>34</sup> The country’s social, economic and health situation is so catastrophic that the Taliban desperately seek Western support and the defreezing of international funds. A number of international organisations and Western states have recently been in contact with the Taliban to address these pressing issues. Germany’s Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Jasper Wieck, and Germany’s designated ambassador to Afghanistan, Markus Potzel, visited Kabul in November 2021

<sup>31</sup> Investment Facilitation Unit. (2020). *Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2020*. Retrieved from <https://invest.gov.af/theme3/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Afghanistan-Statistical-Yearbook-first-Version.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Élan - ideas for Europe. (2021, 21.11.2021). *Europe’s debacle in Afghanistan [Video]*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PvOMfOVYto&t=25s>

<sup>33</sup> NRF. (2021, 22.11.2021). *Professor Faizullah Jalal on Tolo News (ENG Sub). [Video]*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdL-GQdJ7sg>

<sup>34</sup> Élan - ideas for Europe. (2021, 21.11.2021). *Europe’s debacle in Afghanistan [Video]*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PvOMfOVYto&t=25s>

together with a Dutch delegation for talks with Taliban officials, including the two “de facto” Deputy Prime Ministers, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Maulavi Abdul Salam Hanafi”, the “de facto” Foreign Minister Amir Khan Motaqi and the “de facto” Director of Intelligence Abdul Haq Wasiq. Both sides underlined the importance of continuing operational contacts for practical cooperation, first and foremost with regards to the dire humanitarian situation for the Afghan people.<sup>35</sup> According to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Taliban authorities are “committed to ensuring safe and unhindered access for humanitarian aid workers, including female staff, to communities and people in need of such assistance. Germany and the Netherlands reiterated their commitment to provide substantial humanitarian assistance to the Afghan population, all the more as winter is approaching”.<sup>36</sup> A very important point that the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed is that the Taliban authority “reaffirmed their commitment to the general amnesty it decreed upon assuming power and agreed with the need to amplify this message also inside Afghanistan”.<sup>37</sup> The Taliban seem thus very conscious that they cannot afford a further brain drain that touches in particular the educated elite and thus civil society. In the talks, they “expressed their understanding that equal access to education for both girls and boys is a matter of Afghan national necessity. In particular, the general right to attend primary and secondary education up to grade twelve and the need for female teachers to continue their crucial work from grade one through twelve. Curricula for these schools will remain unchanged”.<sup>38</sup>

Without doubt, education is the sector which opens most doors to renewed support in terms of cultural foreign policy. Yet before discussing these opportunities in more detail with the Taliban, red lines need to be drawn regarding their compliance with human rights and especially women’s rights. The Taliban themselves feel that they have evolved since their last period of rule 20 years ago. When pressed too hard on the core of their belief system, they might shut down dialogue and revert to the harsh and austere way of life that they themselves have been used to over two decades of fighting and then inflict it on the rest of the Afghan people. According to their core belief system, this might then simply be God’s will.

According to panellist and renowned *Der Spiegel* reporter Christoph Reuter, who toured numerous Afghan provinces after the Taliban confirmed the value of education, including for girls: “every village wants a school”.<sup>39</sup> One former director of a German foundation in Afghanistan also stressed that the country especially needs increased basic education: “more people who know how to read and write and those who can read need more stimulus and materials to do so”.<sup>40</sup>

Even in rural areas, Afghans seem ready to confront the Taliban on the education issue and thus prove that some form of civil society exists all over the country: “there was a graduation ceremony in a smaller village: girls were speaking up wanting to make a stand on education, which was prevented by a Taliban official who was there. Then a man stands up. A poet that supported the girls, [...] the man was arrested, but the village did not accept this. They said he did not do anything

<sup>35</sup> Auswärtiges Amt. (2021, 18.11.2021). *Federal Foreign Office on talks held in Afghanistan*. Press release. Retrieved from <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/visit-to-kabul/2496758>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Personal interview of the author with Christoph Reuter (25.11.2021).

<sup>40</sup> Personal interview of the author with a person, which does not want to be mentioned (25.11.2021).

wrong. Everything that he said is also completely Islamic [...] the Taliban finally released the poet and even excused themselves for having escalated the situation”.<sup>41</sup>

As the security situation has significantly improved across the country, educational help to rural areas is again possible, though regional specificities must be taken into account. As one panellist underlined, “Afghanistan is really contextual. So, what works in one part of the country does not need to work in the other. For example, in the southeast the tribal structure is intact, so you can work with them, but in the south these structures are completely broken”.<sup>42</sup>

Generally, Western aid organisations were ready to work with government schools but very hesitant to work with religious schools, the *madrases*. The co-existence of two very different institutions with conflicting curricula and approaches led to tensions and extreme polarization: “one went far too right, the other far too left”.<sup>43</sup> One panellist suggested the promotion of initiatives fostering a common ground and cooperation between these two educational systems.

All actors interviewed for this paper concluded that the Taliban would oppose political activities but welcome non-political activities that improve the life of the population, especially in a rural context. Indirect approaches to strengthening civil society can carry real significance: providing support which fosters values like independent thinking, that can in turn lead to critical thinking. For example, award winning competitions in schools to solve practical daily life problems like waste or water management can make people aware that there are multiple solutions to a given challenge. They can also demonstrate that initiative and skills pay off. The same kind of competition can be promoted at university level with even more complex topics. The director of the KAS foundation had been directly asked by Kabul University, now under Taliban management, to continue to provide educational support. This confirms that DAAD’s decisions to maintain and expand programmes goes in the right direction. E-based learning and knowledge or distance learning, for example through radio programmes, should be strongly promoted. Here, learning materials that again encourage independent thinking without being political can be very helpful. Historical materials made accessible through the internet can also call a closed worldview into question – especially if those materials are put in a framework to which Afghans are receptive: “without Western military presence on the ground, the only progressive ideas which can be ingrained in Afghan society need to be somehow referring to internal cultural heritage, whether Afghan and/or Islamic”.<sup>44</sup>

Many Afghans know little about the tremendous cultural past of their country, for example of the huge contribution that Greco-Buddhist culture, that had its roots in Afghanistan, made to global cultural heritage. The “National Atlas of Afghanistan” that appeared in 2014 with the support of the DAAD and provided for the first time reliable and scientific information about resources, infrastructure, nature, and culture is a project that heads in the right direction. Nevertheless, most Afghans do not know that over long periods the country was at the crossroads of different civilisations. Herat, for example, was for centuries a major centre of artistic and intellectual life in the Islamic world. Afghans also know very little of the historic significance of Islamic cities like Bukhara or Samarkand in neighbouring Uzbekistan, despite the fact that a sizable proportion of the Afghan population are Uzbek. Even more notable is the fact

<sup>41</sup> Élan - ideas for Europe. (2021, 21.11.2021). *Europe's debacle in Afghanistan [Video]*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PvOMfOVYto&t=25s>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



that Afghans who are very attached to their religion, like Muslims in many other countries, know very little of the achievements of the golden age of Arabo-Islamic culture across mathematics, geography, astronomy, medicine, architecture, and literature. These pioneering advances were only possible because the great Islamic urban centres like Baghdad, Cairo, Granada, as well as Herat, were open to the world and to Christian, Jewish or Persian influence. The notion of shared heritage creates pride and a certain degree of openness. E-libraries should be created, featuring both world-renowned Arab and Persian writers like Abu Nawas or Rumi who are the pride of the Islamic world but not accessible in book form to most Afghan people, as well as more contemporary writers who equally contradict the closed Taliban worldview. Likewise, the internet and social media have an important role to preserve a part of cultural heritage that is very dear to the majority of Afghans but rejected by the Taliban: music. Playful learning applications and internet gaming – today one of the world’s most powerful media – can also help to educate Afghans, for example with so-called serious games as well as with learning games.

Since the Taliban, who prohibited television 20 year ago, have themselves become social media specialists in terms of propaganda, it is even more important to occupy cyberspace and counter their online narrative. Social media makes it possible to directly reach specific groups of the population, like the numerous ethnic groups, but also to reach women. The globally connected world and the interplay between new media and traditional media can provide unique opportunities in terms of education as well as human rights. Here DW-TV, radio and internet activities can play an important role. Independent initiatives should also be promoted, offering considerable opportunities to connect regional civil society actors – one of the most effective forms of engagement for one of our interviewees: *“For example, [connecting] feminist groups of neighbouring countries which supported feminist groups in Afghanistan”*.<sup>45</sup>

## Women under the Taliban

According to several persons interviewed, pushing the Taliban today towards respect for women’s rights and greater freedom should also be done in an Islamic framework, for example by adopting the historical perspective that the prophet Mohammed guaranteed more rights for women than in pre-Islamic times, or by deploying the example of conservative Arab gulf countries including Saudi Arabia, where women enjoy more rights and always had access to education. The Taliban can probably be engaged most efficiently within their own belief systems: *“many of them are fundamentalist but also realist. If they can sell their ideas as Islamic, that will work for them and against their enemies of the IS”*. On this front, intra-religious dialogue and especially inter-faith dialogue has a certain potential. Religion is also a space for possible communication. Most often, even quite extremist religious scholars are willing to engage with respected scholars from other religions and from within Islam itself. Conferences on Islamic topics with foreign actors could promote at least some degree of consciousness of religious pluralism. To a certain extent, the Taliban already allow for some pluralism as they vowed to protect, under a certain amount of Iranian pressure, the Shiite Hazara minority.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

## The Taliban and Arts and Culture

Other opportunities for possible engagement with civil society in today's Afghanistan are through arts and culture. The Taliban tolerate certain art forms, for example poetry: *“the Taliban are not good in arts,”* noted one panellist, *„but they are strong in poetry. One of the top commanders is singing poetry [...] on YouTube [...] and in the last two months there were more poetry events than in all the year before!”*<sup>46</sup>

Non-figurative fine arts, for example calligraphy, is likewise an Islamic art par excellence. And, as another panellist pointed out, *“Afghans are big fans of comedy, through which criticism is possible even in terms of the status of women as long as it is not political.”*<sup>47</sup>

## The Role of the Diaspora

The Afghan diaspora, some of it present in the West, adheres in large parts to quite progressive values and can help to influence opinions and debates in their home country, partly through international media. Diaspora members can openly debate topics that are taboo in their country of origin, and thus contribute to awareness of alternative political and societal options.

The diaspora can produce powerful mediators: activists, journalists, and artists such as musicians who the Afghan people adore and the Taliban loath. Yet their influence is qualified, as one panellist underlines: *“Due to the partly unfortunate role the diaspora played during the intervention regime, through a partly widespread corruption, the diaspora lost a lot of credibility in the eyes of “ordinary Afghans”.”*<sup>48</sup>

Another panellist, however, underlined the positive role of Afghan women refugees in neighbouring Iran who are important actors in private spaces and create women education centres. *“There are existing actors in the private space like women education centres which were especially founded in Iran. A lot of people went back to Afghanistan and brought these structures with them.”*<sup>49</sup>

Generally, continued European and German engagement not only with the diaspora but also inside the specific country is all the more important in Afghanistan and in other crisis countries, as other globally active players try to fill any void and promote authoritarian visions.

## Competing actors - Turkey and China

In terms of competing actors, brief focus must be given to Turkey and China. Even if Turkey is, in terms of its GDP, one of the biggest contributors of humanitarian aid worldwide, the increasingly authoritarian Turkish government promotes through its cultural foreign policy and its presence – for example in the Middle East and North Africa or in the countries of the Sahel and Central Asia – the acceptance of authoritarian regimes. Behind the doctrine of the “caring nation”, the Turkish cultural institute, the Yunus Emre Institute, claims that *“the world is in*

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



*search of a different a language that does not become the language of violence and conflict. The language of peace and tolerance between different cultures. Today, we are at the dawn of a new era in terms of cultural diplomacy*".<sup>50</sup> The official aim of the increasing number of Turkish cultural institutes is to assure that "different voices can be heard around the world". Behind the benign words, Turkey accuses the west of promoting conflict while presenting itself as a stabilising force that is ready to work with all regimes, all kinds of dictatorships. Obviously, Turkey tries thereby to serve its geopolitical interests with no regard for fostering good governance and social justice, let alone democracy.

China with its impressive number of Confucius Institutes is a second example for a competing actor. The network began with a pilot project in Uzbekistan in 2004 and the first fully-fledged institute in South Korea in the same year. By the end of 2018, there were 548 Confucius Institutes worldwide and 1,193 Confucius Classrooms teaching Chinese in around 162 countries. By 2017, more than 30 million examinees had gone through the global Chinese language proficiency test. For the year 2020, China aimed at establishing a total of 1,000 institutes.<sup>51</sup> Whether these aims were reached is impossible to ascertain without official figures. But by brief comparison, the German Goethe-Institut has 157 branches in 98 countries.<sup>52</sup> The French are present in 137 countries with 226 branches of the Institut français and an additional 832 Alliance Française centres, which exclusively teach French.<sup>53</sup> China's Confucius Institutes, which on the surface appear to be simply an equivalent of the British Council, American Centre, Alliance Française or Germany's Goethe-Institut, "*are in reality soft power propaganda instruments*", as the writer and human rights activist Benedict Rogers states. Rogers cites the former Chinese Communist Parties (CCP) propaganda chief Li Changchun, who a decade ago described Confucius Institutes as "*an important part of China's overseas propaganda set-up*".<sup>54</sup> In 2010, Xu Lin, Director General of a unit of China's education ministry known as the Hanban, "*confirmed that the party wanted to expand its influence and Confucius Institutes were a significant part of China's soft power.*" Similarly, China's Propaganda Minister Liu Yunshan said in 2010 that "*overseas propaganda should be comprehensive, multi-level and wide-ranging [...]. We should do well in establishing and operating overseas cultural centres and Confucius Institutes*".<sup>55</sup> The U.S. Congress, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and intelligence agencies in Canada and Belgium as well as Britain's Conservative Party Human Rights Commission have come to the conclusion "*that Confucius Institutes threaten academic freedom and freedom of expression*".<sup>56</sup>

Both Turkey and China propose through their institutes attractive programmes for foreign students, who, in the Turkish case, often create, after their return to their origin countries, local

<sup>50</sup> Chalandon, M. (2021, 24.03.2021). *Patrie Bleue: la Turquie à la conquête des mers*. France Culture. Retrieved from <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/cultures-monde/de-lidee-a-laction-quatre-doctrines-geopolitiques-34-eurasisme-la-russie-veut-sa-part-deurope>

<sup>51</sup> Sands, G. (2021, 20.02.2021). Are Confucius Institutes in the US Really Necessary?

Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/are-confucius-institutes-in-the-us-really-necessary/>

<sup>52</sup> Knudsen, E., Markovic, D. (2021). "Germany. Factsheet," in: Helmut K. Anheier and ifa (eds.). *The External Cultural Policy Monitor*. ifa. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17901/ecp.2021.019>

<sup>53</sup> Knudsen, E., Markovic, D. (2021). "France. Factsheet," in: Helmut K. Anheier and ifa (eds.). *The External Cultural Policy Monitor*. ifa. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17901/ecp.2021.015>

<sup>54</sup> Rogers, B. (2019, 05.05.2019). *How China's overseas Confucius Institutes pose a powerful threat to academic freedom*. Hong Kong Free Press. Retrieved from <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/05/05/chinas-overseas-confucius-institutes-pose-powerful-threat-academic-freedom/?fbclid=IwAR3ptVwl2EcR9b0zkGeytFIBSKGid4C5elyJTn91TDiKlwf-7C-TroPbGuc>

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Turkish friendship associations to promote the Turkish worldview. Both Turkey and China also have considerable geopolitical and strategic interests in Afghanistan. Turkey claims a leadership position in the Islamic world and sees Afghanistan as an extension of its historical Turkophone zone of interest in Central Asia, notably Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, especially as a sizeable Uzbek and Kazak population lives in Afghanistan. China, in turn, has a huge economic interest in terms of the New Silk Road and access to Afghan natural resources, as well in preventing the Taliban from intervening in its suppression of the Turkophone Muslim Uyghurs minority. Its competition with India also plays an important role. In November 2021, the Confucius Institute in Kabul was still functioning, while the Goethe-Institut had already closed in 2017 for security reasons.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

One of the major preliminary lessons of Afghanistan is that full-scale state building on the model of Western democracy failed.

One of the foremost reasons for this failure is that over 20 years in Afghanistan, nearly all fractions of the Taliban were excluded from dialogue. As the former president Hamid Karzai stated, they should on the contrary already be included at the Bonn Conference in 2001 where the future of Afghanistan was outlined and the Taliban, in a position of military weakness, showed a willingness to negotiate. Experiences in other parts of the world have shown that excluding important actors and significant portions of the population from political and societal processes does not lead to conflict resolution. Here a fine line must be drawn. With some extremist groups like the IS, no negotiations are possible, but a considerable number of extremist group members are often ready to renounce violence even if they profess some non-negotiable, “sacred” values.

Interviewees identified further reasons for the failure of more effective support to civil society, among them: the inability to understand that campaigns for women’s rights were perceived as Western propaganda because they were not framed in Islamic terms; a bias toward urban elites versus efficient engagement with the countryside; and the “monetization” of projects creating an opportunistic relationship to generate income but no meaningful promotion of long-term self-reliance and self-empowerment. Projects stopped when the funding stopped. In retrospect, Afghans rightly doubted Europe’s long-term commitment and thus showed reluctance to engage for fear of Taliban reprisal once the Europeans left.

Generally, cultural foreign policy and the support of liberal democracies towards civil society needs to have clear objectives and scope according to their political priorities and the security environment. Cultural foreign policy must either have a clear long-term commitment or explicitly state that support is temporary and only there to foster the capacity to self-help and resilience. The initial aims in Afghanistan were not clear and subsequently evolved into ambitious full-scale nation-building. Herfried Münkler’s pessimistic assessment that *“Afghanistan is the beginning of the end of a Western global idea of a world order that can be described as based on ‘values and the orientation of norms’”* seems more applicable to the imposed method of state- or nation-building but does not mean that cultural foreign policy based on

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<sup>57</sup> INF. News. (2021, 24.11.2021). *Kabul University in Afghanistan and China-Afghanistan exchanges*. Retrieved from <https://inf.news/en/world/aa399930a18b67e0f7e3eb759c40f3bc.html>

these values and norms should be reduced or that these set of values are irrelevant.<sup>58</sup> It should simply operate with a theory of change of more modest aims. Namely, gradual improvement in the main areas where civil society around the world seems to share basic objectives: the rule of law, a certain degree of social justice and of government accountability, forms of public participation, education, and different degrees of self-expression and accordingly of resilience and self-empowerment in challenging environments.

It is also everything but certain that 20 years of support to Afghan society was in vain. On the contrary, there are fundamentals to be built on. One million students went to university. There are trained media professionals, women and intellectuals criticizing the Taliban. Moreover, the Taliban need the cooperation of a large part of the educated elite and thus civil society to govern. They are at this stage desperate to avoid a further brain drain. Civil society accordingly has some bargaining power.

If Afghanistan is to avoid a renewal of civil war, there is no viable alternative to Taliban rule and Taliban dialogue. Engagement with the Taliban in terms of urgently needed humanitarian aid opens avenues for cooperation in the field of cultural foreign policy and civil society support. Here, the Taliban are especially open to support in the educational sector. Education, including for women, is a widespread demand in Afghanistan, even in the rural areas.

As a member of civil society stressed, the Taliban are not ready to accept political activities but seem so far result-oriented in what concerns practical improvements for the Afghan population. Under seemingly non-political activities, for example competitions about daily life concerns like waste or water management, independent thinking and the respect of human rights can still be fostered. Generally, activities can be promoted with Afghan and Islamic references acceptable to the Taliban mindset. Fostering women's rights, for example, can be done by giving the examples of the wives of the prophet Mohammed and of the relative freedoms of women in Saudi Arabia and Iran, who have more rights than those under the previous Taliban regime. As one participant states *"the only progressive ideas which can be ingrained in Afghan society need to be somehow referring to internal cultural heritage Afghan and/or Islamic"*.<sup>59</sup>

In this context, a lot of venues can be explored. Herat, for example was a major cultural centre over centuries. Afghans know also very little of the significance of historically important Islamic cities like Bukhara or Samarkand in neighbouring Uzbekistan, despite the fact that a sizable proportion of the Afghan population are Uzbek. Even more significant is the fact that Afghans who are very attached to their religion know very little of the achievement of the golden age Arabo-Islamic culture in science like mathematics, geography, astronomy, medicine or architecture or literature. There are also some classical art forms through which we can engage with the Taliban, such as poetry, as well as opportunities in contemporary comedy, where a certain criticism can be voiced and tolerated. The interplay of new and traditional media also provides unique opportunities in terms of education and human rights. Here DW-TV, Radio and internet activities can play an important role. Independent initiatives should also be promoted. These can offer considerable opportunities to connect regional civil society actors, which for one of the interviewees is one of the most effective ways of engagement *"for example, feminist groups of neighbouring countries which supported feminist groups in Afghanistan"*.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 67

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

The Taliban have also expressed interest in collaboration in higher education. The expansion of DAAD programmes goes in the right direction.

The diaspora can produce powerful mediators who can actively debate topics that cannot be discussed openly in Afghanistan: activists, journalists and artists like musicians who the Afghan people adore and the Taliban loath. Yet the influence of the diaspora must be qualified, as one of the panellists underlines its diminished credibility through the cooperation with the corrupt “intervention regime”.

In view of the increased engagement of non-democratic actors like China and Turkey, it is imperative to maintain and even enlarge European and German engagement in foreign cultural policy and aid to civil society. In this context, it is important to strengthen EU cooperation in cultural foreign policy.

The question of security was not the focus of this paper but remains crucial. Rural areas in Afghanistan were also neglected for security reasons. By withdrawing their troops, the US put the Europeans in front of a *“fait accompli”*. For Europe, strategic autonomy is one of the major political challenges of the future, including for cultural foreign policy.

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The publication exclusively reflects the personal views of the authors.

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