

EU, Conflict Transformation and Civil Society: Promoting Peace from the Bottom Up?

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1. Introduction

The European Union, historically conceived of as a peace project, has considered conflict resolution as a cardinal objective of its fledging foreign policy. More specifically, the EU, in its approach to conflict, has prioritized conflict transformation, over and above conflict management and settlement. The EU is prone to viewing and intervening in conflicts in a bottom-up and structural manner, and many of its policy instruments influence the conditions and incentives playing out at the mid- or micro levels of conflict. This is particularly true of the EU's interactions with neighbouring countries.

Civil society is considered a key element in any conflict transformation and peace-building strategy. Recognizing this reality, the EU has acknowledged the importance of engaging with civil society actors in conflict contexts. Particularly in the neighbourhood, it has increasingly appreciated the value of working with local civil society actors.

With these premises in mind, the aim of this chapter is to unpack how the EU can engage with civil society actors in conflict areas as well as to provide an analytical framework to understand the EU's impact on conflict through its engagement with civil society. Recognizing that engagement with civil society is an important element in the EU's strategy does not automatically entail that any such engagement necessarily works towards conflict transformation. Not only are civil society organizations (CSOs) extremely varied, as is their respective impact on conflict, contributing at times to transformation, at other times to escalation, and at others still to the status quo. But also,

the EU's engagement with CSOs, by influencing their nature as well as the political opportunity structure in which they operate, can affect the overall impact and effectiveness of civil society action in conflicts. It is precisely by engaging with some CSOs rather than others and/or engaging them through a variety of instruments such as funding, training and dialogue, that the EU can have a variety of impacts on conflicts.

In order to explore the EU's impact on conflict through its engagement of civil society, this chapter posits three hypotheses, adapted from the original societal pyramid set forth by Lederarch (1997). The liberal peace hypothesis represents the EU's goal in its civil society engagement strategy. Under this hypothesis, the EU props-up its peace strategy targeted at the top levels of society, through direct engagement with the mid-levels and, to a lesser extent, the grassroots. In view of the interconnections between top, mid, and grassroots levels, the EU enhances the overall impact of its conflict transformation policies. This ideal is not always met. Specifically, we can posit two further hypotheses in which the EU's engagement with civil society has a distorted and distortionary impact on conflict. Under the disembodied civil society critique, the EU (over)engages with civil society, altering its very essence in a manner that renders civil society disconnected and disembodied from the grassroots. In doing so, the EU not only fails to promote genuine civil society development, but also works against its own objective of pursuing peace strategies which have a transformative impact on the ground. Finally, the Gramscian critique posits that the EU (under)engages with the top levels of society. In doing so, the EU does little to alter the overall political opportunity structure in which civil society operates, again doing little to enhance the positive transformative impact that CSOs can have in conflict contexts.

Rather than addressing which and to what extent these hypotheses apply, this chapter presents a number of empirical examples drawn from the EU's engagement with civil society in several neighbourhood conflicts in order to illustrate the relevance of these hypotheses. The examples are

drawn from conflicts both to the south – Israel-Palestine, Morocco-Western Sahara – and to the east – Moldova-Transnistria, Georgia-Abkhazia and Armenia-Azerbaijan-Nagorno Karabakh.¹

2. The European Union and Conflict Transformation

The Treaty on European Union explicitly states that the EU's aim is to promote peace (Article 3(1)) and that its role in the world should reflect the principles that have inspired its creation, development and enlargement (Article 21(1), first subparagraph). The Treaty identifies the preservation of peace, the prevention of conflict and the strengthening of international security among the Union's core foreign policy priorities (Article 21(2)(c)). More interestingly, the EU's conception of peace, which has been elaborated since the 1990s, has been broad, long-term and organic, and has included the principles of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, international law, good governance and economic development (European Commission 2001). This conception is tied to that of peace-building, which is embedded within the tradition of the "liberal peace" and can be traced back to former UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali's 1992 Agenda for Peace. In other words, as the EU emerged as a foreign policy actor engaged in conflict resolution in the 1990s, it espoused and elaborated the goal of peace-building. This goal has been in line both with the EU's own nature and ethos as well as with the approach developed by the United Nations in those years.

These public pronouncements clearly suggest that the EU is intent on promoting conflict transformation over and above conflict management and settlement. Although with the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU has deployed a number of civilian and military missions in conflicts worldwide, these have been typically aimed at medium-to-long term aims such as border monitoring, security sector reform and judicial reform. In other words, the

¹ This chapter draws on the research results of a three-year project in the framework of MICROCON – an Integrated Project financed by the European Commission. The results of this project are published in full in Tocci (2011).

EU is not simply interested in pursuing the management of crises and conflicts through the maintenance of ceasefires and the negotiation of political settlements. It rejects the idea that violent conflict is endemic to human nature and espouses the view that conflict resolution and transformation is possible through the search for mutually beneficial solutions that allow for the satisfaction of all parties' basic human needs (Burton 1990). Further still, the EU views as critical "indicators" of conflict prevention and resolution elements such as human and minority rights, democracy, state legitimacy, dispute resolution mechanisms, the rule of law, social solidarity, sustainable development and a flourishing civil society (Kronenberger and Wouters 2005). This suggests that the Union aims at transforming the structural features of violent conflict, eradicating what Galtung (1969, 1994) defines as the seeds of structural violence: social injustice, unequal development and discrimination. While theoretically distinct, the EU's approach also fits what Richmond (2005b) conceptually and more broadly defines as third-generation "peace-building approaches", which cover the wider economic, political and social make-up of countries before, during and after the end of violent conflict.

Beyond foreign policy objectives, the EU is also endowed with policy instruments which are particularly well-suited to pursuing conflict resolution and peace-building. Alongside the sphere of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the CSDP, the Union promotes conflict transformation principally through its "constructive engagement" with conflict parties (European Commission 2001: 8-9). By constructive engagement, EU actors mean the deployment of a wide variety of measures of cooperation, which are normally specified in contractual agreements with third countries. These contractual relations take different forms, providing for different degrees of integration in, and cooperation with, the EU. They range from the accession process, aiming at the full membership of a candidate country, to looser forms of association, which envisage measures of economic, political and social cooperation with EU structures, to trade and development agreements with African-Caribbean and Pacific countries. These looser forms of association are also

“contractual” in nature. Rather than a Treaty of Accession as in the case of the accession process, they foresee Association Agreements, Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, Stabilization and Association Agreements, etc. Beyond the goal of achieving varying degrees of cooperation with the EU, these contractual ties aim at fostering long-term structural change, such as conflict transformation, within and between third countries.

The promotion of structural and sustainable peace has been prioritized above all in the EU neighbourhood. This was made clear in the 2003 Security Strategy, updated in 2008, which argues that the Union’s task is to ‘make a particular contribution to stability and good governance in our immediate neighbourhood (and) to promote a ring of well governed countries to the East of the EU and on the borders of the Mediterranean with whom we can enjoy cooperative relations’ (European Council 2003). It was reiterated in the Treaty on European Union, which states that the Union ‘shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union’ (Article 8(1)). Most tellingly, the documents establishing the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) voice the Union’s aspiration to contribute to the solution of regional conflicts (European Commission 2004: 6). This goal has been reaffirmed and strengthened in the review of the ENP in 2011 (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2011).

In particular, the ENP, building upon existing contractual ties with neighbouring countries (e.g. the Association Agreements with the southern Mediterranean countries or the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with the former Soviet countries), promises to enhance the depth and breadth of EU involvement in neighbourhood conflicts. Not only does the ENP consider conflict resolution as one of its key priorities, but in its Communication, the European Commission (2006a) argues that these conflicts ‘are not only our neighbours’ problems. They risk producing major spillovers for the EU, such as illegal immigration, unreliable energy supplies, environmental

degradation and terrorism'. In another Communication, the European Commission (2007: 6) adds that the Union has 'a direct interest in working with partners to promote their [conflict] resolution, because they [conflicts] undermine EU efforts to promote political reform and economic development in the neighbourhood and because they could affect the EU's own security'. In 2011 the EU affirmed the need to 'enhance EU involvement in solving protracted conflicts' (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2011: 5). Furthermore, the manner in which the ENP is structured, making use of detailed Action Plans foreseeing long lists of priorities spanning across all policy areas, increases the scope for the EU's bottom-up and long-term involvement in conflict transformation. As put by the European Commission (2007: 6), 'the deployment of all available tools, whether first, second or third pillar, would increase EU influence and avoid the limitations of short-term crisis management'.

3. Conflict Transformation and Civil Society

Within the tradition of conflict transformation and peace-building, the role of civil society is of the essence (Lederach 1997, Rupesinghe 1995). Civil society organizations (CSOs) are, on the one hand, pivotal in providing the necessary support for peace, ensuring that any agreement negotiated by political leaders is ultimately accepted and implemented on the ground (Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse 1999). On the other hand, civil society can provide the necessary push for peaceful social change, especially when the top levels within a conflict context are unwilling or unable to budge on the fundamental issues of the conflict.

This is not to say that civil society is always and necessarily a force for good. Insofar as civil society is a reflection of society at large, in contexts of violent conflict and divided societies, "uncivil society" inevitably exists, and at times thrives. It can contribute to the polarization within and between communities, the reinforcement of horizontal inequalities and the legitimization or

actual use of violence in the name of nationalism, exclusionary ideologies and at times even democracy, human rights and self-determination (Barnes 2005). In other words, civil society is both an agent for change and a reflection of the conflict structure. It can both promote conflict transformation and peace-building but also “fuel” or “hold” the conflict, exacerbating or prolonging the status quo (Marchetti and Tocci 2009). By operating within a structure of conflict, often marked by state failure, authoritarianism, poverty and insecurity, civil society can be an actor in conflict escalation, encouraging nationalism, ethnocentrism and violence (Paffenholz and Spurk 2006). Yet even in these cases, civil society remains a force to be reckoned with.

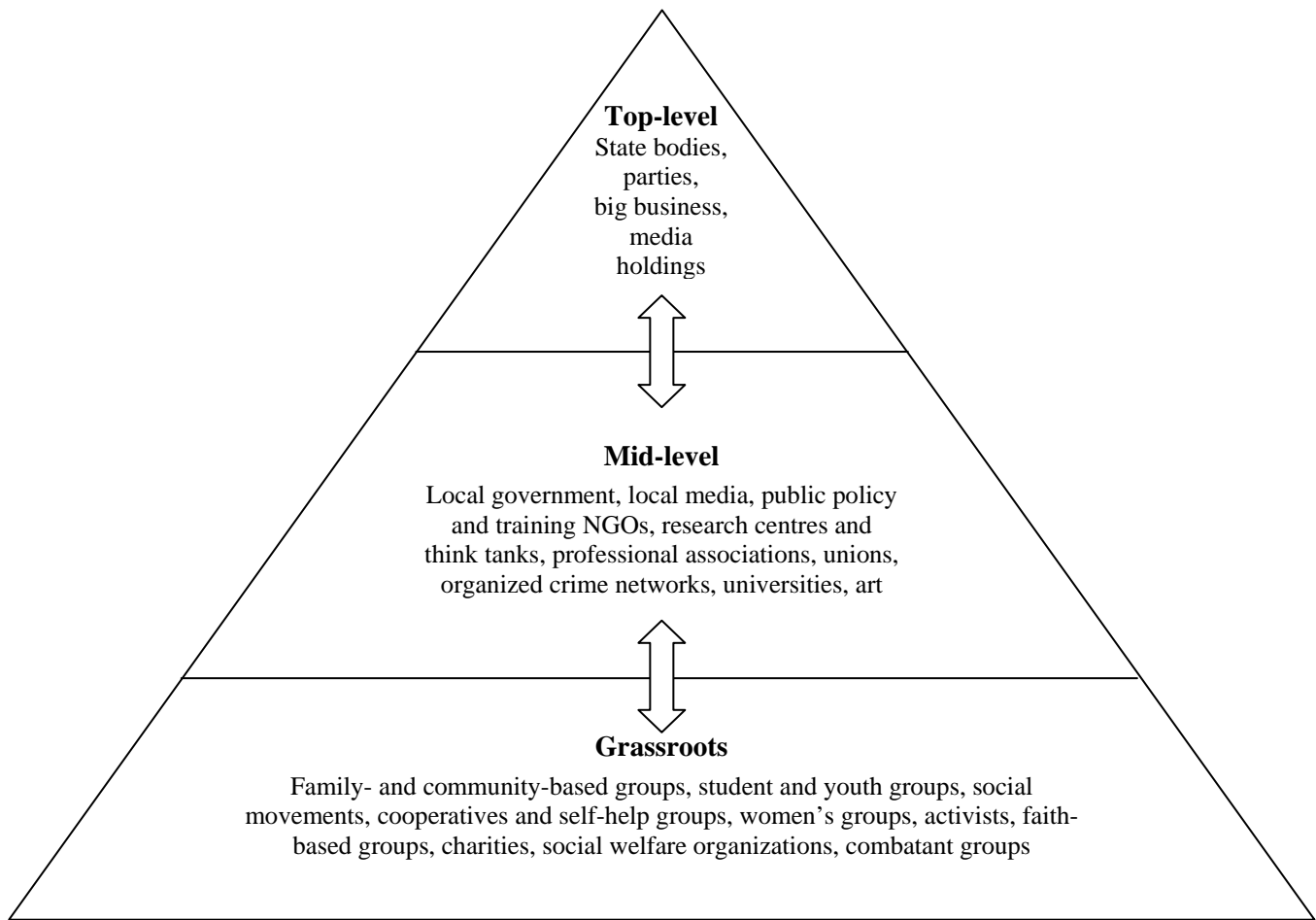
Precisely how and why does civil society contribute to conflict escalation as well as transformation? Civil society, while being distinct from the state, the family and the market, acts as the social glue between these three domains, thus fulfilling an essentially political function in society. In other words, civil society is distinct from, while interacting with, politics and policy (Chazan 1992: 281). As analysed by Lederarch (1997) and reproduced in Figure 1, civil society is active at both mid- and grassroots levels of society. At mid-level, there are elite civil society actors, including universities and research centres, professional NGOs, unions and professional associations, local media groups and artists, as well as overtly “uncivil society” groups such as organized crime networks. At grassroots level we find smaller NGOs and networks such as community, women’s, student and faith-based groups, social movements and activists, combatant groups and supporting institutions, cooperatives, self-help organizations and charities.

Most importantly, civil society links the three stylized levels of society in Lederarch’s pyramid. On the one hand, mid-level CSOs are closely tied to top-level policy-making through their interactions with parliaments, executives, big business, foundations and major media holdings. Through their advocacy, policy research, and negotiation support activities, mid-level CSOs can both ease conflict settlement and press the top levels to modify the structural features of governance that gave rise to

conflict in the first place. These mid-level actors build personal and professional relations with the top levels, and have a pivotal function as a result of their unofficial nature. Compared to the top level, mid-level CSOs in fact normally enjoy more political independence, and thus more creativity and flexibility, as well as a greater ability to operate beyond the limelight of the media. This allows them to act as critical norm entrepreneurs in conflict transformation (Wallace and Josselin 2001). They also have better access to, and dialogue with, diverse sectors of society, being able to talk to different parties without losing credibility, and a greater inclination to work on long-term and structural issues, rather than on short-term ones determined by the current political agenda.

On the other hand, mid-level actors are organically linked to grassroots CSOs, which are the principal agents in the cultivation of “peace constituencies” in society writ large (Lederarch 1997). They do this by mobilizing the public to tackle and react to the underlying conditions of structural or open violence through education, training, capacity-building and awareness-raising. Indeed, many social movements are made up of networks of like-minded NGOs operating at grassroots and mid-levels. Mid-level and grassroots CSOs also induce conflict transformation by fostering societal reconciliation, through inter-communal dialogue, peace commissions, and by fostering functional cooperation and communication across communities. Finally, CSOs can reach out to the wider public through service delivery, be this of a material (e.g. relief and rehabilitation) or psychological (e.g. post-war trauma therapy) nature. Civil society interactions with the public are of the essence in ensuring that the voice of the people is not drowned out in the evolution of both conflict and peace.

Figure 1: The conflict transformation potential of civil society



Source: Lederarch (1997)

4. The EU, Conflict Transformation and Civil Society: Methods of Engagement

The EU has already acknowledged the importance of engaging with civil society in order to enhance the effectiveness of its foreign policy in general and its peace strategies in particular. Civil society is viewed by the EU both as an aim to be promoted in and of itself, as well as a means through which the Union can pursue more effectively objectives such as the promotion of peace and the protection of human rights (Dudouet and Clark 2009).

In particular, the EU increasingly values engaging with local civil society in conflict contexts, particularly in the neighbourhood (European Commission 2006a). These CSOs may often look rather different from international NGOs working on conflict, and may well be non-voluntary in nature, less organized, less professional and with fewer human and financial resources than their international counterparts. Yet whether formally organized or informal associations or non-voluntary groupings, local civil society typically has a greater understanding, legitimacy and stake in both conflict and conflict transformation (Bell and Carens 2004). Rather than acting as an external bystander, it is a first-hand actor in conflict, and as such represents a necessary, albeit insufficient, actor in promoting peace. Local CSOs can act as the seed of group formation, mobilization, communication and empowerment. These are necessary to induce peaceful social change (Varshney 2001), but may also create the necessary “opportunity” for conflict escalation (Murshed and Tadjoeeddin 2008).

More specifically, the ENP views local civil society as a key actor in the neighbourhood, being part of the democratic governance of the EU and of its neighbours, providing valuable monitoring and policy implementation functions, as well as contributing advice and expertise to EU institutions and neighbourhood states alike. Alongside global EU policy instruments in support of civil society, such as the Instrument for Stability (IfS) and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), in the context of the ENP, the EU has foreseen specific policy initiatives to support civil society in the neighbourhood. For example, the Union, in the context of the ENP has established platforms for dialogue with neighbourhood CSOs (European Commission 2006a), targeting in particular CSOs working on democratization, human rights, freedom of expression, women’s rights, education, environment and research.

The EU has engaged with civil society actors in the neighbourhood through three principal methods: dialogue, training and funding.

First, EU institutions can engage in dialogue with CSOs: publicly expressing appreciation/condemnation for particular CSOs, attending CSO activities, and facilitating access to contacts and information exchanges amongst CSOs and between CSOs and international actors. The underlying aim of these different forms of dialogue is to gain a deeper understanding of a conflict, socialize CSOs into adopting different positions or engaging in different activities, and raising the morale and status of particular CSOs. Dialogue can take place through private meetings between CSOs and EU actors within conflict contexts. EU institutions can alternatively provide safe venues for CSOs to meet in order to exchange skills, experiences and information. Finally, EU institutions can organize wider public meetings in which CSOs are invited to Brussels to brief and discuss with EU actors. The annual EU-NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) Human Rights Forum is a case of an institutionalized forum for consultation with civil society. Likewise, since the late 1990s, the European Parliament and Commission have established regular contact with civil society actors through the Human Rights Contact Group, the Civil Society Contact Group, the Common Foreign and Security Policy Contact Group and the Arms Transfer Contact Group. Furthermore the European Peace-building Liaison Office (EPLO), a sub-group of the European Platform of NGOs, established in 2002 an office in Brussels in order to improve civil society access to EU institutions and policy-making in the field of conflict resolution. The EU's principal focus has been on European CSOs. The Contact groups with the European Parliament include less than a dozen large European CSOs, while the EPLO includes 23 national or transnational European CSOs and networks.

Second, EU actors can engage with civil society through training, for instance by providing scholarships and technical material and training courses to CSO representatives in fields such as communication (e.g. political debate, public relations and advocacy), substantive issues such as international law, human rights and EU law, as well as organizational and financial capacity,

recruiting supporters and members. In some cases, training and funding are closely interlinked, such as the training courses offered by EU delegations in some third countries in order to acquaint CSOs with the necessary procedures and techniques to apply for EU funds. Training can also happen in the reverse direction. Part of the mandate of the EU's IfS for example is that of supporting CSOs to provide EU institutions with early warning and conflict expertise and information (Duke and Courtier 2010).

Third, the EU's direct engagement with CSOs can take the form of financial support, including funding to organizations or to specific programmes and projects. Within conflict contexts, several financial instruments are set aside precisely for this purpose. A key instrument is precisely the IfS, and within it the Peacebuilding Partnership, which focuses, *inter alia*, on civil society capacity-building, Track II diplomacy and early warning expertise by CSOs. In addition, there are specific actions aimed at CSOs in the Commission's Research Framework Programmes, funds under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) and the Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA) as well the EIDHR. Funds allocated within contractual relations, such as the ENPI or the IPA, are primarily channeled through the intermediation of official institutions in third countries, and only through the latter do they reach civil society. In view of the limits of this approach, the EIDHR and, more recently, the IfS are of particular relevance. The EIDHR and the IfS are used, *inter alia*, to support CSOs worldwide by-passing the state. Through them, the EU aims to promote human rights and democracy in the former case and crisis management and peace-building in the latter.

5. The EU's Impact on Conflict Transformation in the Neighbourhood Through Engagement With Civil Society: Three Hypotheses

EU methods of engagement with civil society – dialogue, training and funding – can affect civil society's role in conflicts in two ways. It can affect the *structural* features of conflict, thus

impacting upon the political opportunity structure in which civil society operates. In this way it can shape the effectiveness of civil society actions, and in particular two of its critical determinants: intra-civil society relations, and relations between CSOs and the state (Paffenholz and Spurk 2006; Paffenholz 2009). The implementation of the ENP Action Plans agreed bilaterally with individual neighbourhood countries could, by shaping the policies and institutional features of conflict countries, influence the overall environment in which civil society operates, facilitating or hindering both CSO interactions, and the relationship and access of CSOs to the state. By covering a wide range of sectors such as institutions, infrastructure, health, education, trade and investment, the implementation of the Action Plans could thus play a role in shaping the overall environment in which CSOs operate, increasing or reducing the effectiveness of their actions in conflict.

The ENP can also affect the civil society dimension of conflict by influencing the role of CSOs as *agents* in conflict and conflict transformation. Particularly since 2006, the EU has recognized the need to strengthen the civil society dimension of the ENP. It proposes enhancing the quality and status of CSOs in the neighbourhood through exchanges between CSOs in the EU and the neighbourhood in the economic, social and cultural fields, and by making use of the resources available under the ENPI. The European Commission (2006a and 2006b) has also openly suggested enhancing civil society participation in the ENP by encouraging neighbourhood governments to seek civil society involvement in governance. To this end, the Commission organized an ENP conference in September 2007 bringing together governmental and civil society actors from the EU and neighbourhood countries for the first time (European Commission 2007: 11). The emphasis on civil society within the ENP has grown over the years. In its 2011 review of the ENP, the EU proposed to enhance its partnership with societies in the neighbourhood by establishing a dedicated Civil Society Facility, and a European Endowment for Democracy (European Commission and High Representative 2011: 4-5). In other words, the ENP aims at enhancing the quality and status of local civil society in the neighbourhood through training, exchange and funding and by seeking to

develop the domestic political role of CSOs. Financial instruments such as the EIDHR, the IfS, and, in future, the Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment for Democracy, act in support of this goal.

Despite this general will to enhance its peace-building role in the neighbourhood through civil society, two critical questions remain open. First, with which CSOs does the EU engage in the neighbourhood? As discussed above, civil society can fuel conflict as well as promote peace. Does the EU correctly identify fuelling actors and activities? If so, does it and should it engage with, ignore or weaken these CSOs, and only interact with peace-building ones? Second, does the ENP succeed in increasing the effectiveness of peace-building civil society activities, or does it instead inadvertently weaken the impact of such activities?

In order to answer these two fundamental questions, we will set out three hypotheses. These three hypotheses are by no means mutually exclusive, and we may well find that features of all three co-exist within the same conflict. In fact, the three hypotheses should be read as ideal (and non-ideal) types, which will rarely be found to apply exclusively in any conflict.

5.1 Hypothesis 1: The liberal peace paradigm

A first hypothesis to be tested is that the EU contributes to conflict transformation by:

- a. strengthening the *structure* of local civil society by increasing the interconnectedness between mid-level CSOs and top-level actors on the one hand, and mid-level and grassroots actors on the other, thus increasing the impact of civil society on conflict
- b. enhancing the *agency* of peace-building CSOs, while weakening or constructively altering the views and actions of fuelling/holding CSOs, primarily by engaging directly with mid-level CSOs (through dialogue or funding) and by indirectly reaching out to grassroots CSOs.

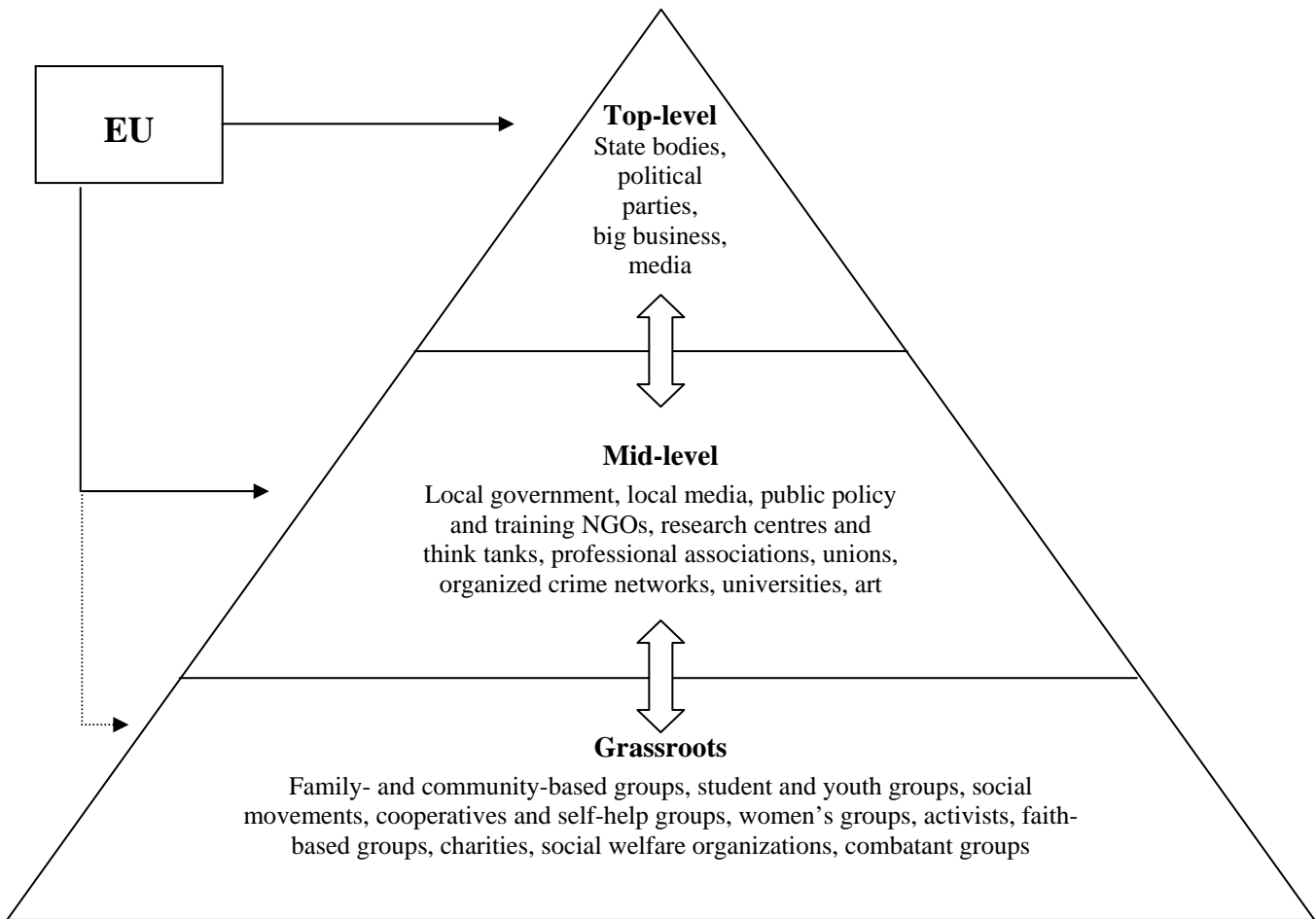
In fulfilling this hypothesis, the EU should satisfy two main conditions. A minimum threshold objective is that of “doing no harm” (Anderson 1999). The EU thus ensures that its policies, be they aimed at structure or agency, do not have negative distorting effects, such as the delegitimization of peace-building CSOs through excessive co-option or the inadvertent strengthening of fuelling CSOs through openly supporting, ignoring or actively attempting to weaken them. In the neighbourhood, this seems to be the case in Moldova and Transnistria, and to a lesser extent in Georgia, Abkhazia and Armenia. In these cases, as opposed to others and in particular Israel-Palestine, the EU’s impact on civil society and, consequently on the conflict, is marked by two principal features. On the one hand, the EU is active in the conflict country, yet its presence and assistance to civil society has not fundamentally affected or distorted local civil society. On the other hand and related, the EU is perceived rather positively by the conflict parties. The EU may be and is criticized in these countries, yet the nature of the criticism tends to revolve around the fact that the EU’s level of engagement is too little rather than too much.

Moving beyond the minimum “doing no harm” objective, is the more ambitious goal of building local capacities for peace by empowering peace-building CSOs and weakening or altering the views of fuelling CSOs (Bigdon and Korf 2002). As illustrated by Figure 2, the EU on the one hand can increase the interconnectedness of the three levels of society (point a. above), and on the other it can raise its effectiveness in conflict transformation by interacting with mid-level CSOs, which are connected to grassroots CSOs and the wider public (point b. above). In the eastern neighbourhood, the EU, through its financial support and dialogue with CSOs, has contributed to some extent to the development of the civil society sphere. It has tended to fund and support organizations which have had a positive transformative impact on conflict. It has not however boycotted altogether organizations which have furthered solutions contrary to its objectives. On the contrary, both in Transnistria and in Abkhazia, the EU has engaged in dialogue with and has supported financially

organizations which promote secession, a goal which is contrary to the Union's own vision. In particular, the EU has played an important role in empowering NGOs in Abkhazia, yet in a manner that has allowed them to keep their essentially grassroots character and to enjoy close ties with the authorities, and which has not prevented them from openly criticizing the EU's role in the region. In Moldova and Transnistria, has strengthened the capacity of CSOs both through funding and by participating in civil society activities. Through its engagement with Transnistrian civil society, the EU has also opened a channel of communication with the Transnistrian authorities. The relevance of the liberal peace paradigm hypothesis increased as and when the EU appointed Special Representatives to the South Caucasus and Moldova and opened Commission delegations in Tbilisi, Baku, Yerevan and Chisinau, giving EU actors greater knowledge and awareness of the local civil society scene in these countries.

This said, the EU has generally supported civil society organizations and activities that have had only an indirect bearing on the conflict in these countries. With the exception of the EU's support for the creation of a network of CSOs dealing with conflict issues in the framework of the Black Sea Synergy, or projects funded in the context of the IfS, the EU has generally supported organizations and activities, in the context of the ENP, the Eastern Partnership as well as funding mechanisms such as the EIDHR, which have not specifically tackled conflict issues. Hence, it has pushed for the involvement of CSOs in the formulation and implementation of the ENP Action Plans, bolstering the monitoring functions of these organizations as well as their standing vis-à-vis both the state and society. In Armenia in particular, the EU's engagement with CSOs in the context of the ENP has expanded the political space for civil society's interaction with the government. In other words, particularly in some of the post-Soviet cases, the liberal peace paradigm hypothesis partly resonates, yet does so within the broader dynamics of EU support for democracy and good governance rather than the EU's specific peace-building ambitions.

Figure 2: The liberal peace paradigm



Source: adapted from Lederarch (1997)

5.2 Hypothesis 2: The disembedded civil society critique

Under a second hypothesis, EU engagement with local civil society is detrimental to conflict transformation. This is not simply because the EU misidentifies local CSOs, thus inadvertently strengthening fuelling CSOs and/or weakening peace-building CSOs. It is rather because the very fact of engaging with local civil society alters its nature and effectiveness in a manner detrimental to peace.

This can take place in two interlinked ways. First, EU interaction and engagement with local CSOs can lead to an apparent “depoliticization” of local civil society (Fischer 1997), rendering mid-level

CSOs technical instruments at the service of the top levels in both the domestic and the international context. This in turn leads to a proliferation of CSO activities focussed on the symptoms of conflict, to the detriment of peace-building civil society activities. This can take the form, for example, of EU engagement and support for liberal, technical, professional service-based and urban NGOs to the detriment of more overtly political CSOs, such as trade unions, social movements, religious charities or community-based organizations operating in more local and rural contexts (Belloni 2001; Chandler 2006). EU (and other external) funding and support for civil society in conflict may in fact lead to an “explosion” of the NGO sector, also dubbed “non-grassroots organizations”, briefcase NGOs (BRINGOs), mafia NGOs (MANGOs), criminal NGOs (CRINGOs), government-owned NGOs (GONGOs), commercial NGOs (CONGOs) and my-own NGOs (MONGOs) (Reimann 2005: 42). Driven by external funds, these organizations become veritable businesses, and may increase corruption in the civil society domain as well as inequality. They may even create new stakes in the continuation of conflict. Smaller or more political organizations are either directly shunned by the EU or fail to meet the necessary technical/bureaucratic requirements to be allocated EU funds. As such, the potential for the constructive mobilization and politicization of society is reduced, diminishing the prospects of grassroots actors altering the structural conditions of violent conflict.

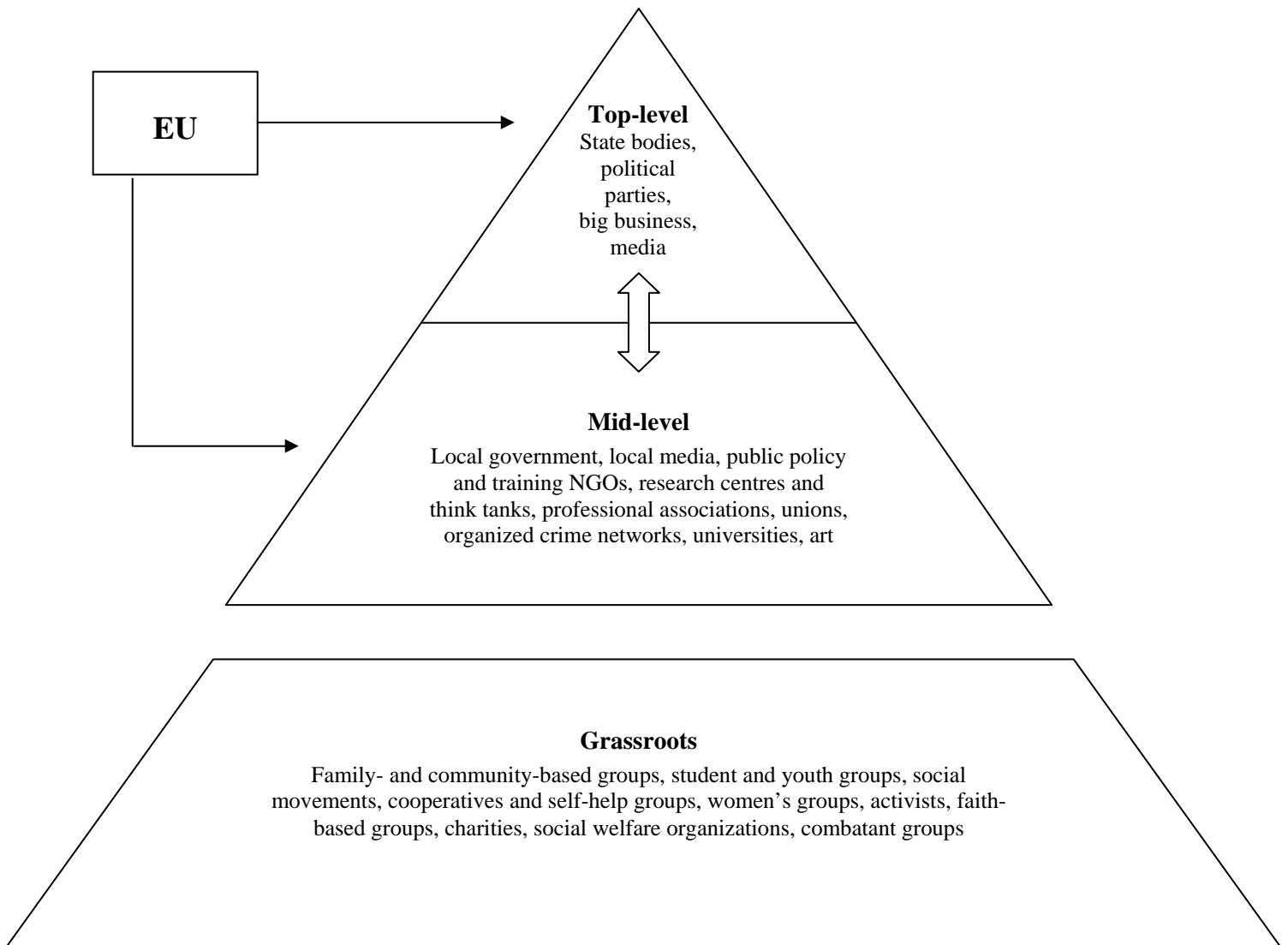
Second, EU and more generally external engagement with and support for civil society can excessively “politicize” and co-opt civil society, transforming local CSOs into spokesmen for external policies, priorities and proposed solutions, which may be alien to the needs and desires of the conflict parties themselves (Ferguson 1990; Chandler 1998). As put by Richmond (2005a: 26), CSOs would act ‘as thinly veiled fronts for powerful state interests in that they act as a front for the insertion of realist state interests in a disguised form’. Civil society would thus become driven more by the top-down supply of external funds than by the bottom-up demands of societal needs and desires. In an attempt to justify or legitimize EU policies in conflict contexts, civil society actors

would delegitimize themselves, to the point of being viewed as “traitors” in the eyes of grassroots CSOs and the wider public. The mere fact of being funded by an external actor such as the EU could also create the perception in the public’s mind that a CSO is acting on behalf of foreign rather than domestic interests.

In other words, under this second hypothesis, EU policies in conflict contexts would not be strengthened by engagement with local civil society aimed at improving the rootedness and the transformative potential of the EU. The reverse would instead be true, whereby the EU fundamentally shapes and alters the nature of local civil society into a dependent functional substitute within the liberal paradigm of its foreign policy, detaching and delegitimizing it in the eyes of the public (Chandler 2001). In doing so, a limited and distorted form of civil society would emerge, while existing local capacity would be harmed or destroyed (Richmond 2005a). Civil society would lose its autonomy and become accountable to EU donors rather than its own domestic constituencies. It would respond to the EU’s political priorities as well as to the tendency to focus on short-term, outcome-driven and quantifiable projects, which may be far removed from the long-term, dynamic, process-driven and multidimensional needs of peace-building (Vukosavljevic 2007). As a result, local civil society involved in peace-building would become at best ineffective or at worst would switch into holding or fuelling conflict. Nowhere is this more evident than in EU policies in Palestine (and in the West bank in particular). The magnitude of EU funds to the West Bank, alongside the EU’s skewed focus on some CSOs (i.e. those aimed at alleviating the costs of conflict through humanitarian relief or promoting “contact” between Israelis and Palestinians as an end in itself rather than as a means to induce a cognitive re-articulation of the conflict) at the expense others (CSOs within the Palestinian diaspora, grassroots CSOs, Islamic CSOs or CSOs viewed as too critical of the State of Israel or the Palestinian National Authority) have fostered the growth of a disembedded civil society and the acceleration of the de-democratization of Palestine. As highlighted in Figure 3, the EU, by interacting with top- and mid-level actors, thus distorts the

nature of civil society, contributing to the detachment of mid-level CSOs from grassroots CSOs and the wider public.

Figure 3: The disembedded civil society critique



5.3 Hypothesis 3: The Gramscian critique

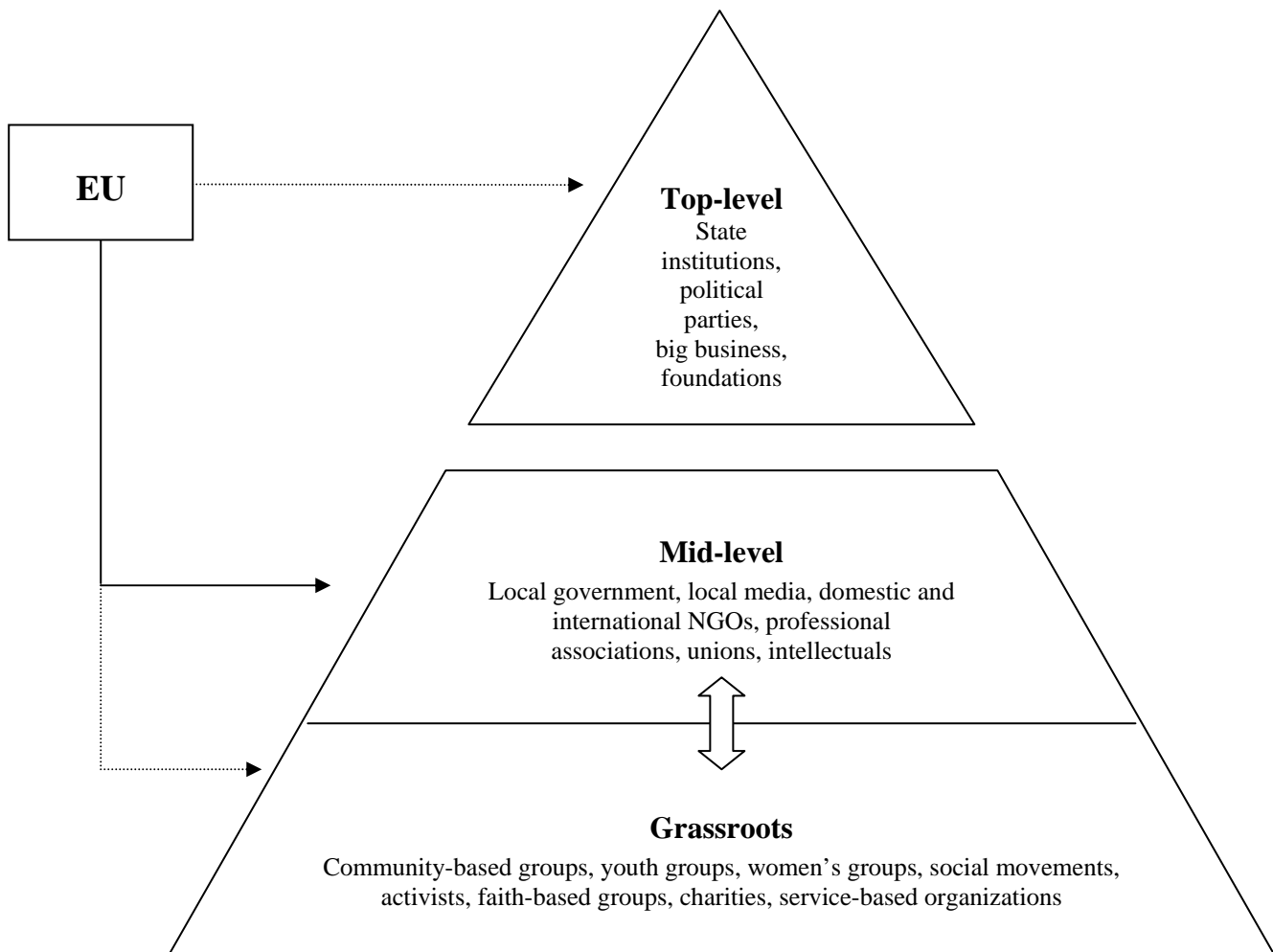
A third and final hypothesis assumes that conflict is driven also if not predominantly state-based actors, who in turn are inextricably tied to the civil and political societies domain in a Gramscian fashion (Gramsci 1971: 238). In turn, civil society, in isolation, cannot be viewed as an actor in

conflict or conflict resolution. It is rather the role of civil society in interaction with the state that determines the civic potential to transform conflict. Equally important is the interaction between the state and civil society in terms of the space the state leaves open to civic engagement, independently and in interaction with the state. More broadly, without a conducive context achieved through institutional and political change, the scope for civil society impact is limited (Fagan 2010). If this space is limited or non-existent (i.e., in the authoritarian and illiberal contexts often found in conflict situations), then EU engagement with civil society is unlikely by itself to have a visible impact on conflict. Unless the EU exerts effective pressure on state actors to engage in democratic reform, thus altering the structure in which civil society operates, EU policy is unlikely to induce conflict transformation. Likewise, if the EU engages with state actors by supporting or failing to persuade neighbourhood states to alter their structural political deficiencies, then its support, engagement and financing of civil society cannot improve the effectiveness of its conflict transformation policies. This is highlighted in Figure 4, which shows the detachment of the top levels of society from mid-level and grassroots actors. In this context, EU policy ineffectively influences conflicts by engaging with CSOs, yet failing to engage and pressurize effectively the top levels into bringing about structural change.

EU policies in conflict countries often seem to be marked by a paradox. The EU attaches prime importance to official negotiations. Yet with the exception of Moldova-Transnistria, in all other cases the EU does not have a defined conflict settlement strategy. In Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and Western Sahara, the EU has paid lip service to dysfunctional mediation forums – the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the United Nations – without attempting to actively contribute to reviving them. In Israel-Palestine, the EU has been a member of the Quartet (also including the United States, Russia and the United Nations) since 2002, but it has never attempted to replace, nor in fact to meaningfully influence, Washington's mediation. In practice, this has meant playing into the status quo and its conflict escalating

dynamics. The dissatisfaction inherent in the fact that the EU attributes importance to Track I negotiations but plays only a passive role in them has poisoned the EU's approach to civil society. At times, EU engagement with civil society has constituted a surrogate for an active role in mediation. The EU's over-engagement with (a segment of) Palestinian civil society is a case in point. At other times, the absence of a political strategy towards the conflict has meant not engaging with civil society at all, in acquiescence to particular regimes. This is the case with regard to the EU's non-engagement with Saharawi CSOs, Palestinian CSOs in Gaza and more broadly with CSOs with an Islamic identity. To a lesser extent the same can be said of the EU's highly circumscribed approach to CSOs in Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. In the first case the EU's excessive caution is due to the non-recognized status of the enclave. In the second case it is the result of the highly authoritarian nature of the regime and its suspicion of the EU's engagement with local civil society. Noteworthy in this respect is the fact that the first EU grant for local CSOs in Azerbaijan was made only in 2008 (in the framework of the EIDHR).

Figure 4: The Gramscian critique



6. Concluding remarks

This chapter has unpacked analytically the links between three elements: the EU, civil society and conflict. As noted at the outset, the European Union, in view of its very nature, has been prone to viewing conflict and peace comprehensively. Its instinctive philosophy has been that of promoting peace-building over and above narrow objectives of conflict and crisis management. Civil society is recognized as playing a key role in conflict and peace, particularly when the latter is interpreted broadly. The EU has acted upon this recognition, engaging civil societies, particularly at the local level, within conflict countries. This however does not necessarily mean that the EU has always and

necessarily engaged civil society effectively to promote conflict transformation. This chapter has set out an analytical framework to make sense of such EU engagement, highlighting through examples drawn from the European neighbourhood, where and how the EU has achieved varied results through its civil society engagement in conflict countries.

Civil society alone cannot peacefully transform conflict. Yet particularly when conflict narratives are deeply embedded and conflict settlement processes deadlocked, it can sow the seeds of positive transformation. EU engagement with civil society in conflict is thus necessary. But it is insufficient. In order for the EU to contribute to conflict transformation in its neighbourhood, its engagement with civil society must be part of a multidimensional strategy and cannot result from overcompensation or undercompensation for the absence of such a strategy.

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