

Circumventing the central: How EU rural development programmes in Georgia engage with local civil society

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Abstract

The European Union's choice of civil society partners and methods of democracy promotion in its external relations and specifically its neighbourhoods have been repeatedly criticized. Accordingly, the EU's focus on professionalized Western-oriented NGOs composed of national elite actors meant that the general public was widely excluded from these processes. Hence, civil society and democracy promotion are widely argued to be widely ineffective. This paper contends that through the LEADER rural development programme, the EU responds to some of these criticisms by supporting rural inclusive civil societies. Yet, there exists considerable risk that the de-centering of civil society promotion from the capital to rural areas merely replaces the national centre with regional ones. Finally, the article raises the question whether the assumption that civil society promotion would be more effective if it was only de-centred, is valid.

Keywords: EU external action, civil society promotion, democratization, rural development

Introduction

The EU's engagement with civil society in its variously constructed neighbourhoods, both the candidate countries in the Western Balkans and Turkey as well as countries in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) area, has been repeatedly criticized by both academia and think tank literature. One strand of this criticism targets the EU's choice of civil society partners: mostly professionalized non-governmental organizations (NGOs), based in the capital and staffed by university educated English-speakers, assuming them to promote their Western understanding of liberal democracy. Yet, this part of civil society is at the same time widely acknowledged to be disconnected from 'the wider public' or even distrusted by them. Particularly residents of rural areas are identified to be excluded from civil society support. Considering this criticism is nothing new, has the EU responded to it?

This paper argues that it has, albeit indirectly and in a limited scope. It studies the case of the EU-funded implementation of the LEADER¹ rural development programme in Georgia. Specifically, LEADER's design aims to foster inclusive participation in decision making by

¹ Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale.

various local actors from the government, businesses, civil society organizations and the general public. Thus, it responds to various criticisms by the literature on EU civil society promotion and on civil society and democracy in Georgia specifically.

Yet, the programme also raises two further questions. First, does LEADER meet these goals? Indeed, one of the main consequence of the programme seems to be a mentality change and generated trust within local areas, as well as towards local governments and the EU. However, whether the process indeed benefits the participation of ‘peripheral’ actors is questionable. Rather, the promotion of participation by a disconnected elitist civil society in Tbilisi is likely to be replaced by local elites in regional centres. Second, the paper raises the question whether the assumption of a specific need to focus on rural areas allegedly lacking civil society activity is valid or reflecting a limited understanding of civil society. Additionally, some insights from the decentralization literature may indicate that de-centering does not necessarily lead to more participatory democracy or a ‘stronger’ civil society. Here, the paper does not provide any definite answers but raises the issue for future inquiry.

Generally, the paper is intended as the exploration of an interesting case rather than an as a straightforward scientific investigation connected to overarching theoretical debates. Thus, it engages with secondary literature, academic but also mainly from practitioners as well as think tanks, aiming to gain a more ‘on-the-ground’ perspective of local contexts. Additionally, it includes insights from interviews conducted with Georgian NGOs and LEADER practitioners as well as EU staff in 2018 and 2019 and surveys by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC). As mentioned, the case study motivated the question of this paper. Firstly, the LEADER programme has, inside the EU, been hailed as extremely successful regarding its participative decision-making. Secondly, its implementation in Georgia is thus far the only of its kind, representing an index case worth of investigation. Thirdly, the programme seems like an ideal candidate to counter the criticisms raised in the literature regarding EU civil society and democracy promotion as well as the alarms rang regarding these processes in Georgia.

Subsequently, the paper first highlights some rough themes in the literature on civil society and its relation to democratization as well as for EU external actions. Then, the problems Georgia faces in these areas are discussed, before offering a short description of the LEADER programme and its implementation in Georgia as a programme (inter alia) fostering civil society and participative democracy. Consequently, some results of the programme are discussed before raising the question of whether the need for civil society promotion specifically in rural areas can be easily assumed.

Democracy, Civil Society, and Participation

For the purpose of this paper, two interrelated literatures, primarily with a view to EU external action are touched upon: civil society promotion and democratization. Regarding the latter, the main focus will be on the dimension of participation, as it most directly connects to both concepts of civil society and the idea behind the LEADER approach.

The conceptualization of civil society and its relationship with democratization remains contested. For instance, a clear-cut distinction of civil society from the state, economy and individual/family sphere is difficult to uphold in practice (Kopecky 2003: 7f.; Mudde 2003: 157; Jacobsson & Korolczuk 2017: 2). Similarly, a normative distinction of a liberal democratic ‘civil society’ from a supposed ‘uncivil society’ has been widely refuted (Kopecky 2003: 10; Mudde 2003: 159; Gready & Robins 2017: 958). Rather, civil society could be understood as a “[...] heterogenous, highly fluid sphere of associations and organizations” rather than drawing strict a priori boundaries around civil society (Kopecky 2003: 12; see also Alexander 2006: 31). Yet, even associational life itself may not capture the entirety of civil society. An understanding of civil society strength merely as numerical measure is anachronistic and ad hoc mobilisation or informal types of engagement may mobilize more people for a cause than formal associations, requiring fewer resources (Jacobsson & Korolczuk 2017: 8; Mercer 2002: 10). In fact, especially the focus on formal organizations has triggered the conflation of civil society with (professionalized) non-governmental organizations (Mercer 2002). Importantly, being more capable of winning funding from international donors, “the urban middle-classes are [...] over-represented within these growing NGO sectors, and often lack mass-based rural constituencies” (Mercer 2002: 15), a theme that has been taken up by studies of EU civil society promotion in its neighbourhood as explored below. Hence, Jacobsson and Korolczuk in their case study of Polish Civil Society propose a process- and practice-oriented definition including “[...] a variety of activities ranging from low-key local informal initiatives to organized forms of action and mass social movements”, meaning “[...] all forms of intentional action undertaken collectively, including low-key social activism oriented toward practical goals [...]” (Jacobsson & Korolczuk 2017: 2f.).

In turn, the promotion of civil society (organizations) has been connected, and sometimes understood as synonymous to democratization (see e.g. Raik 2006; Lane 2010; Gready & Robins 2017). Often, the relationship is assumed to be axiomatic: “[...] while NGOs are part of civil society, they also strengthen it through their activities, which in turn supports the democratic process” (Mercer 2002: 7). It is assumed that democratic states can simply not

function without a strong civil society, however conceptualized (Reisner 2018: 25; Raik 2006). In the phase of democratic consolidation, arguably the one Georgia finds itself in currently, civil society is thought to play a watchdog role over the government, as well as encourage wider citizen participation (Diamond 1994: 7; Merkel & Lauth 1998; Reisner 2018: 2; Raik 2006: 3). Simply by existing, NGOs are assumed to pluralize the political arena, giving voices to a wider range of people, especially poor and marginalized groups (Mercer 2002: 8). This thinking of encouraging citizen participation is precisely what the LEADER approach bases itself on, as explained below. Yet, this conflation of NGOs with civil society and in turn democracy is problematic as civil society actors do not necessarily promote ideas adhering to Western liberal interpretations of democracy and civil society, requiring a contextualized approach taking into account local dynamics and histories as will be elaborated on in the last section (Mercer 2002: 11; 13).

Despite these conceptual issues, the European Union as well as a plethora of other donors have invested significant funds into fostering or creating ‘civil societies’ around the world in the hope they would spread their vision of democracy. While the EU continues to primarily engage with non-member states’ governments, relations to civil society actors have become a substantial part of the EU’s external action narrative and practice, through instruments such as the European Neighbourhood (Policy) Instrument, Civil Society Forum and European Endowment for Democracy (Buzogany 2018: 196; European Commission 2017a: 2).

However, the policy practice of civil society promotion and democratization has been heavily criticized, especially regarding its Western-centrism and normative assumptions. Arguably, the promoted style of civil society has failed to gain traction especially in post-Soviet states, where participation in and public trust into those Western-style CSOs is low (Buzogany 2018: 188; Jacobsson & Korolczuk 2017: 8; Ishkanian 2015; Sava 2015).

“Many of the NGOs hailed in Western policy circles and academia, i.e. pro-Western, liberal democratic groups have few if any ties to national grass roots, and communicate mainly if not exclusively with their international (i.e. Western) donors” (Mudde 2003: 158).

In particular, attention has turned towards a discrepancy between professionalized, English-speaking NGOs in urban centres that have thus far been the focus of EU civil society promotion and an (undefined) broader public (e.g. Buzogany 2018; Petrova & Tarrow 2007; Balfour et al. 2019: 36; Schumacher & Bouris 2017: 17; Falkenhain & Solenko 2012). Consequently, there have been repeated calls for a more flexible, less bureaucratic approach and the inclusion of small as well as non-traditional civic actors (Balfour et al. 2019: 2; Raik 2006: 19). In particular,

attention has been shifting towards civil society in rural or otherwise peripheral areas (Balfour et al. 2019: 36).

At the same time, the EU's democracy promotion has arguably not brought the expected benefits. Here again, much of the existing work revolves around the interaction with state elites, politics or sectoral policies (Freyburg & Richter 2015; Freyburg et al. 2009: 916f.; Lavenex & Schimmelfennig 2011). In turn, while democratic norms may be selected in negotiations and adopted into policy, they are rarely applied in practice and thus lack impact or in the worst case, benefit existing authoritarian governments (Youngs 2009; Freyburg et al. 2009; Börzel et al. 2015; Freyburg & Richter 2015). Especially in contexts of democratic backsliding within neighbourhood countries' governments, an overt focus on democratization in civil society engagement may in fact be counterproductive (Balfour et al. 2019: 37; Lavenex & Schimmelfennig 2011: 903). Rather, civil society support could be fostered through programmes focusing on less politicized socio-economic issues rather than democratization per se:

“[...] the EU should favour a strategy that places more emphasis in civil society support on social issues as opposed to explicitly political ones, and that lets consciousness about civil society emerge from citizens and their concerns rather than be just encouraged by donor and NGO advocacy [...]” (Balfour et al. 2019: 37).

In this paper, the focus will be especially on the participation dimension of democracy promotion, fostering non-electoral forms of participating in the political system and thus reconnecting to the issue of civil society promotion (Matten & Crane 2005). Here again, participation, democracy and civil society are understood as interacting parts of a whole:

“A democratic political system not only allows, but also encourages its citizens to take active part in public life. It is one of the key features of democracy that people act together in an organised manner in order to formulate and express their interests, values and identities” (Raik 2006: 1; see Kakhsivili & Panchulidze 2018 for the case of Georgia).

Is the EU responding to these shortcomings? Indeed, the EaP 20 Deliverables for 2020 aim to diversify EU civil society outreach to include a larger spectrum of local actors (European Commission 2017a: 2). Yet, as EU actors do not always know how to identify 'the right' actors and due to financial accountability responsibilities, the EU has not yet engaged in a deeper shift towards promoting a diversified civil society concept (Balfour et al. 2019: 31; Buzogany 2018: 196). Arguably, the LEADER programme could provide the blueprint for such a shift away from elite- and capital-centrism, as will be argued below.

Georgia’s civil society and participative democracy: elite-owned, centralized, distrusted

While Georgia has been hailed as the new champion of Europeanization, civil society actors and think tanks have raised alarm bells regarding its civil society and democratization (see e.g. Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum 2018). Arguably, there is a lack of consensus in the population as to the importance of liberal democracy (Kakhishvili 2018). In a 2017 poll, only 50% of rural residents answered that democracy is preferable to other forms of government (CRRC 2017). In 2018, 55% of rural inhabitants answered that a western-style democratic republic is the most suitable political system for Georgia (CRRC 2018).

One cause attributed to this lack of democracy enthusiasm is the alleged concentration of Georgian civil society in Tbilisi and public distrust towards it (Kakhishvili & Panchulidze 2018: n.p.; Aliyev 2014: 273). Importantly, only a negligible number of Georgians say that they are active members of a civil society organization (Aliyev 2014: 265) and the latter “[...] were often seen by participants as polarized, self-righteous entities that speak in the name of all people” (Kakhishvili & Panchulidze 2018: n.p.; Reisner 2018: 14). At the same time, public trust in many other democratic institutions, including parties, media, and parliament are low, standing in stark contrast to the strong support of the Georgian Army and particularly the Georgian Orthodox Church (Georgian Institute of Politics July 2018: 4; Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum 2018; Kakhishvili 2019; Caucasus Barometer 2017; NDI 2018). Arguably, the public displays “[...] distrust towards, frustration with and fear of political participation [...]”, particularly in rural areas (Kakhishvili & Panchulidze 2018: n.p.; ENPARD 2018: 5). Finally, “participation was often viewed as pointless and futile activity [...]” or even as implying negative consequences for people and their families (Kakhishvili & Panchulidze 2018: n.p.). Here, especially the high rates of rural poverty, subsistence agriculture and unemployment need to be noted, probably discouraging formalized voluntary activity (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum 2018: 57; Caucasus Barometer 2017; Aliyev 2017: 272).

In general, the detachment of civil society organizations from the public has been a theme throughout Georgian history, while Soviet Union rule largely eradicated any existing civil society organizations (Reisner 2018). Perhaps unsurprisingly, much of civil society during the 18th and 19th century were middle-class capital-based culture and education societies without any broad membership (Reisner 2018: 6 – 10). While in the mid-19th century Tsarist authorities establish village assemblies to connect to rural areas, and even though these assemblies until the 1930s at least partly allowed for some form of civil society in the countryside, they became

largely forgotten under Soviet rule (Reisner 2018: 11). Today, NGOs in rural areas are said to have very limited influence on local affairs (Reisner 2018: 18f.):

“Although increased NGO activity is observable now also in rural areas, most of these lack a broader membership base and mostly leave out the most pressing issues for the broader society: socio-economic development” (Reisner 2018: 18).

The LEADER method

LEADER, first established in the EU in 1991, is a rural development programme that revolves around the idea that the inclusion of a various local actors, feeling more responsible towards ‘their’ area, fosters innovative, efficient, and sustainable solutions (Shucksmith 2010: 2; Pollermann et al. 2017: 1; Papadopoulou et al. 2011: 665). Albeit representing a marginal proportion of the Common Agricultural Policy budget, LEADER has been a staple of EU rural development narrative and since 2007 must be included in all national and regional rural development programmes in the EU (European Commission 2006: 6). To summarize, LEADER is characterized by seven core features:

LEADER’s core features

1. area-based and local
2. ‘bottom up’ approach (decision-making by broader local population, economic and social interest groups, public and private institutions)
3. coordination by Local Action Groups (LAGs)
4. innovation facilitation (e.g. introduction of new products, modernisation of traditional know-how)
5. integrated multi-sectoral actions
6. simplified networking to disseminate good practices
7. fostering cooperation of LAGs in joint projects, ideally under shared structures, within the EU or third countries

Table 1 European Commission 2006: 8 - 14

As one of these features, Local Action Groups should include representatives of local public and private socio-economic interests such as businesspeople, authorities, as well as NGOs and unorganized local citizens (European Commission 2014: 3). Once established, LAGs draft a Local Development Strategy and distribute funding among local projects (European Commission 2006: 10). The representation of each group (local economy, local government, local civil society) should come to one-third each with no group being allowed to wield over 50% of the votes in any decision.

LEADER has been externalized to non-member states through SAPARD (Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development) for the new member states, IPARD (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance in Rural Development) for candidate countries, and ENPARD (European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development) for Neighbourhood countries, although the LEADER axis has thus far only been implemented in Georgia².

Considering LAGs and the focus on ‘bottom up’ approaches, it becomes clear that LEADER is intended to go beyond a development programme, with participation and civil society promotion playing a vital part (see e.g. Yang et al. 2015). In a guide for expanding LEADER to the Western Balkans, Turkey and beyond, EU Commissioner Hogan notes:

“At its heart, the LEADER method is not just about delivering EU funding; it aims to mobilise women, young people, private and public stakeholders, the social partners and the non-governmental sector [...] to participate actively [...]” (European Commission 2017b: 3).

In interviews, the bottom-up inclusive approach towards decision making in LEADER is seen as its stand-out feature as will be demonstrated below³. Indeed, various studies identified wider participation and even empowerment both in EU and non-EU applications of LEADER (Ray 1998; Papadopoulou et al. 2011; Csurgó & Kovách 2016; Granberg et al. 2016; Kopoteva & Nikula 2014). Given that within a LAG, actors from local governments, businesses and civil society including ‘the wider public’ share decision making powers, it could arguably provide Georgians entrances into participative democracy and formalized civil society in rural areas which has been identified as lacking in the general EU civil society and democracy promotion literature and for the case of Georgia specifically. For instance, it addresses the lack of trust into both governmental actors and civil society. Moreover, the aforementioned sense that participating in civil society is futile is addressed considering that LAG members can decide over funding specific local projects.

In Georgia, eight LAGs have been created since 2015, initially in the three pilot municipalities Borjomi, Lagodekhi and Kazbegi before being expanded to Teritskaro, Dedoplistskaro, Akhalkalaki, Keda and Khulo. One striking characteristic is the difference in population in the municipalities, ranging from 3,000 inhabitants in Kazbegi to 51,000 in Lagodekhi. As a uniting feature, the areas are indeed generally geographically remote, mostly lying in mountainous terrain.

² LEADER has also been externalized through natural experimental designs e.g. in Russia and through the cooperation of a European LAG with a non-EU group.

³ Interviews 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9.

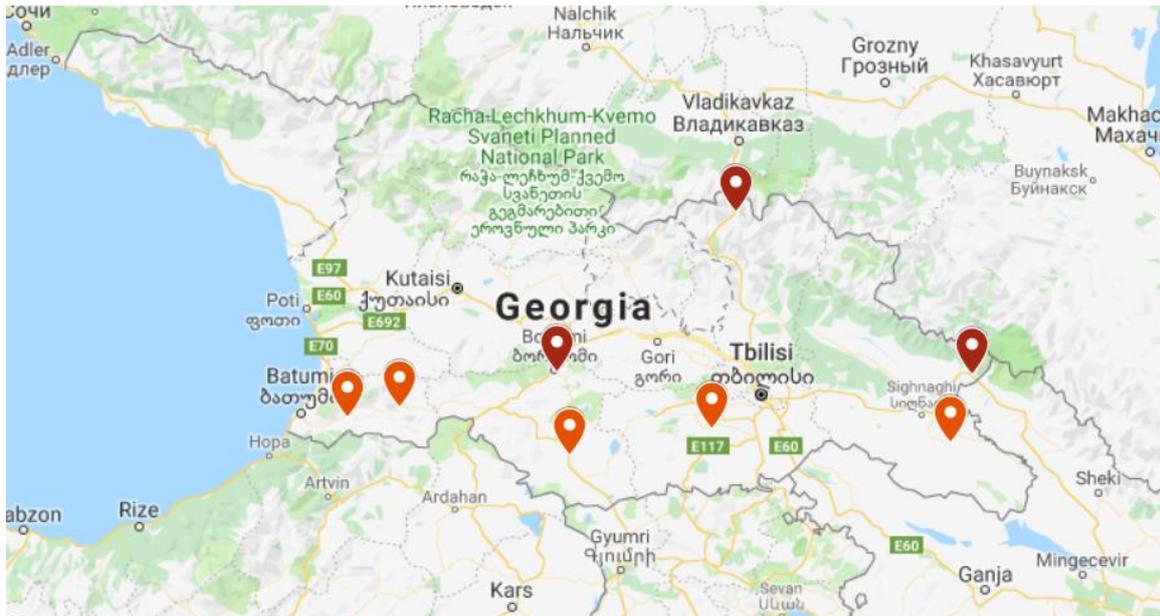


Figure 1 Georgian LAGs, original LAGs in dark red

Yet, what needs to be noted is that the understanding of civil society here again is preoccupied with formalized organizations. Not only does the EU subcontract the implementation to international NGOs including Care International, the Mercy Corps, and People in Need, LAGs themselves often become formalized as NGOs.

Finally, also considering the suggestion for EU civil society promotion to focus on depoliticized issues mentioned previously, LEADER seems like an ideal case. On the one hand, political decisions in the county are highly centralized to a small group of people (or solely former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili). On the other hand, the government seems largely uninterested in its regions. While often, mayors from the ruling party win elections due to a vastly larger resource base, there are few policies addressing rural areas or smaller towns. Only in 2017, in cooperation with the EU, has Georgia adapted a rural development strategy.

To sum up, LEADER's focus on participation of a broad range of actors in rural development decision making responds to a variety of criticisms both generally of EU democracy and civil society promotion: it focuses on rural areas rather than the capital or urban centres and the inclusion of actors beyond the central government or professionalized NGOs. Additionally, it responds to Georgian concerns regarding participative democracy and civil society, for instance the alleged distrust of NGOs, the lack of civil society organizations' priorities regarding economic development and connectedly the perceived futility of participation. Yet, the on-the-ground consequences present a more complicated picture.

LEADER: cultivating democracy and a de-centred civil society?

This paper was primarily inspired by answers to interview questions on the consequences of LEADER in Georgia. While in the literature on the programme within the EU much attention lies on the higher efficiency and better targeting of rural development measures through the involvement of locals, what was striking in the Georgian case was the frequent mention of a shift of mentality in rural areas from widespread passivity and mistrust to the belief by rural populations that they can truly shape decisions and as a result are more motivated to participate in civil society⁴ (ENPARD n.d.: 10; Reisner 2018: 20). Locals were reported to communicate, associate as well as trust each other and local governmental actors more⁵ (ENPARD n.d.). Therefore, LEADER is perceived as the antidote to the alleged passive local communities shaped by the Soviet Union policies in which people in rural areas were largely excluded from any meaningful decision-making⁶ (Reisner 2018: 13ff.).

“Overall, the apparent attitude change among the LAG members and in the wider community to a certain degree seems to leading local citizens to better understand and embrace the concept of volunteering. It provides [the] opportunity of not being [a] passive observer of what [the] government does but taking [the] lead in action” (ENPARD n.d.: 11).

In fact, an EEAS representative noted that this idea of participation triggered the externalization of LEADER to Georgia in the first place: “The starting point was the participatory approach, promoting the idea of involvement” and “inclusive governance”⁷. Furthermore, “LEADER is not about grants, it is about participatory decision-making: involvement, engagement, decision making”⁸.

“[...] The] LAG experience [has] practically shown [a] feasible mechanism through which effective cooperation and participation in decision-making can take place [...]” (ENPARD n.d.: 19).

In addition, it was argued that the most active members are indeed from the civil society category, rather than from the local executive or businesses⁹. Especially the participation of women and young people was frequently mentioned¹⁰ (ENPARD n.d.: 5). In Kazbegi, the realization by the LAG that retaining young people in the area constituted a rural development priority led to their inclusion in decision making (ENPARD n.d.: 11). However, an NGO official remarked that while formally attention is being paid to the inclusion of young people,

⁴ Interviews 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.

⁵ Interviews 1, 8, 9 10.

⁶ Interviews 1, 5, 7.

⁷ Interview 1.

⁸ Interview 1.

⁹ Interview 9.

¹⁰ Interviews 1, 5, 6, 7.

they are typically not in central decision-making positions which are occupied by more “important, senior people”¹¹.

Whether LEADER in Georgia is indeed inclusive is questionable. Some participants both involved in the implementation in Georgia and at EU-level did not know who is included in LAGs¹². Especially people in geographically remote villages do not participate regularly, due to bad infrastructure and accessibility of some mountainous villages particularly during winter¹³ (ENPARD n.d.: 6). What adds to this problem is the fact that the LEADER areas in Georgia are geographically large compared to many of those in the EU, meaning that people would have to travel large distances to LAG meetings, generally held in the municipal capital¹⁴. Thus, while LEADER in Georgia is not centralized in terms of the national capital, participation is often determined by distance to the municipal centre.

Furthermore, the included civil society actors are often rather part of the local elite, for instance teachers, farmers or entrepreneurs¹⁵. Powerful locals continue to shape much of the process, even though the EU expects that the contracted NGOs counterbalance this influence¹⁶. However, whether this can indeed be successful in an environment where, as outlined below, informal interactions on the kinship level are deeply entrenched is questionable. Reflecting the criticism of EU civil society promotion raised previously, another problem continues to be language barriers. For instance, training for LAG members was often only offered in English, meaning that someone from the LAG had to ad-hoc simultaneously translate¹⁷. While it has been argued that people with English language skills are often younger and thus this may counterpoise the influence of powerful locals¹⁸, it is much more likely it disadvantages inclusive, bottom-up decision making.

To sum up, while the LEADER programme seems to constitute a good first step into the direction of increasing participation in civil society, the ‘centralization’ that has been criticized by much of the EU civil society promotion literature seems to have merely shifted from the capital to other, regional centres with problems of elite-capture and inclusivity remaining.

¹¹ Interview 8.

¹² Interviews 2, 3, 10.

¹³ Interviews 1, 7, 9.

¹⁴ Interview 9.

¹⁵ Interviews 8, 9, 10.

¹⁶ Interviews 1, 7.

¹⁷ Interviews 9, 10.

¹⁸ Interview 1

However, the next section raises a different question, namely whether the criticism regarding the centralization of NGOs and civil society promotion in capitals is indeed adequate.

Periphery or centre in EU external civil society promotion?

First, it needs to be pointed out that much of the arguments highlighting the distrust in institutions and NGOs often rely on interview data and can be questioned when looking at surveys. Considering the 2017 Caucasus Barometer, rural citizens seem to not only not distrust NGOs (16% fully or rather distrust NGOs), they trust them more than Tbilisians (29% rather and fully trust compared to 17% in Tbilisi; CRRC 2017). Yet, it is striking is that 19% of rural respondents do not know whether they trust NGOs (compared to only 6% in the capital). Nonetheless, the poll seems to indicate that Georgians in rural areas generally trust institutions more than inhabitants of Tbilisi, as indicated by figure 2. This is particularly pronounced for local governments, trusted by 44% of rural residents. Importantly, this differentiation in trust clearly does demonstrate any LEADER impact, considering the poll was conducted when only three LAGs were fully operational.

	Rather trust/ Fully trust: Capital	Rather trust/fully trust: Rural
Parliament	18%	29%
Central government	20%	38%
Political Parties	5%	14%
Local government	17%	44%

Figure 2 CRRC 2017

Additionally, in 2018 rural residents felt they had more influence on the government than did those in the capital or large urban areas (46% vs. 42% and 38%; CRRC 2018).

Arguably, what characterises rural areas is not the lack of civil society but informal civil activity. In fact, contrary to their image as passive, 63% of rural residents recently helped a neighbour or friend with household chores and more rural inhabitants participated in public meetings than those in Tbilisi or other urban areas (CRRC 2017). One alternative informal constellation that can, utilizing a broad definition, be understood as civil society are kinship networks which are hugely important especially in the rural Georgian context (Aliyev 2014). Asked why they do not volunteer for an NGO, the vast majority of people especially in rural areas respond that they would rather take care of their family’s affairs (Aliyev 2014: 273; 275). This reflects a broader criticism, alluded to previously, in which parts of the literature assumes “[...] that civil society (in its familiar western guise) has somehow gone wrong in the

developing world; that these societies are incapable of becoming ‘civil’” (Mercer 2002: 11). Certainly, these informal methods are not necessarily fostered in any way by LEADER which continues to prefer engagement with international NGOs and the formalization of Local Action Groups.

Finally, some of the literature on decentralization, albeit not focusing on civil society but local governments, has questioned its impact on the participation dimension of democracy, corresponding to some arguments of the civil society and LEADER literature

“Decentralization, especially through devolution of decision-making to local governments, is expected to provide the maximum feasible space for villagers’ participation. The local government is closer to the people than the central government, so devolution minimizes the amount of time and distance to interact with the government” (Sutiyo & Maharjan 2017: 19; see also Cheema and Rodinelli 2007; Laverack 2001).

Echoing the results of LEADER, while some authors indeed identify increased participation especially by marginalized groups (Ahmad & Talib 2015: 829), others argue that the benefits of decentralization may be enjoyed by a small local elite (Sutiyo & Maharjan 2017: 18; Johnson 2001; Blair 2000: 23; 34f.; Mercer 2002 9f.) and a truly wide participation let alone empowerment regarding decision making may take decades if achieved at all (Blair 2000: 23; 32). While there currently is a lack of literature on the ‘EU’s external governance of decentralization’, this literature would provide a good starting point for those criticizing the support of capital-based civil society. Whether a de-centering of civil societies results in a reduced focus on elites remains an empirical, highly context-dependent question and cannot be assumed a priori.

Conclusion

Despite being highly contested conceptually, the European Union’s external actions, particularly in the Eastern Partnership countries, have increasingly aimed to foster civil societies and participative democratization. Yet, much of the academic and think tank literature criticizes the EU’s practices as ineffective, being too focused on Western, professionalized non-governmental organizations based in the capital, detached from ‘the broader public’. Rather, what has been advocated is a focus on smaller or informal civil societies in rural areas, including marginalized groups and on rather depoliticized subjects.

This paper illustrates that through the LEADER rural development programme, particularly its implementation in Georgia, the EU addresses these criticisms. LEADER’s central idea is that a broad range of actors from rural areas share decision making powers, thus promoting ideas of participatory democracy and civil society.

At the same time as responding to criticisms of EU external civil society promotion, LEADER also addresses worries regarding the state of participatory democracy and civil society in Georgia, primarily the lack of trust among the public in NGOs and other democratic institutions, as well as the lacking incentives to participate.

Indeed, the LEADER programme in Georgia is widely believed to be successful in these areas. What has been emphasised consistently is the triggered change of mentality from passivity and distrust to participation and cooperation. Yet, there needs to be more attention as to who participates and who does not: rather than elites in Tbilisi, now local elites are strengthened. Concurrently, rather than constituting truly de-centred and inclusive decision making, LEADER replaces the centrality of Tbilisi with that of rural centres, continuing the exclusion of remote villagers from the processes.

Importantly, the assumptions both of the literature on Georgia's civil society and the EU's civil society promotion need to be revisited. Considering survey data, rural Georgians do not seem to be less trusting or passive than their Tbilisian counterparts. Rather, they prefer to participate in informal civil society relations, not that fostered by the EU. Moreover, more research needs to be conducted into the premise that civil society promotion needs to be decentralized, considering results from the governance decentralization literature more generally.

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List of interviews:

- Interview 1: EEAS official
- Interview 2: DG AGRI official
- Interview 3: DG AGRI official
- Interview 4: European Parliament official
- Interview 5: Georgian NGO official
- Interview 6: Georgian NGO official
- Interview 7: Georgian NGO official
- Interview 8: Georgian NGO official
- Interview 9: Georgian NGO official
- Interview 10: Georgian NGO official