

## **Civil Society in Providing the Development of Democracy in the Countries of the Eurasian Economic Union**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to explore the influence of civil society on the level of democracy in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and propose mechanisms to enhance civil society formation for strengthening democratic processes. A comprehensive review of scholarly literature on civil society and its relationship with democratic development was conducted, alongside an analysis of the unique characteristics of EAEU member countries. Comparative assessments were made to determine the extent of civil society development, as measured by the Civil Society Participation Index, and the characteristics of democratic procedures, as measured by the Democracy Index. The findings indicate a link between civil society strength and democratic advancement. Specifically, countries with robust civil societies, such as the Republic of Armenia and the Kyrgyz Republic, demonstrate higher levels of democratic development. This underscores civil society's role as a catalyst for political and social transformations and state-building processes.

**Keywords:** Civil Society, Civic Involvement, Democracy, Public Organization, Eurasian Economic Union

### **Introduction**

The development level of democracy changes every year. In 2021, the percentage of people living in democracies worldwide fell well below 50%, and authoritarian regimes gained the upper hand. According to the latest Democracy Index data, more than a third of the world's population lives under an authoritarian government, while only 6.4% live under a full democracy. The overall democracy score in the world dropped from 5.37 to 5.28 out of 10 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, n.d.).

Many researchers claim that a capable civil society affects the development of democratic processes in society and democracy in general. Bernhard et al. (2017) believe that civil society creates frameworks to prevent the spread of authoritarianism. Quest (2015) pointed out that it is impossible to build a democracy without a society that is organized horizontally and with public organizations.

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Diamond (1999) outlined the interaction between civil society and the state through the prism of social trust. This aspect is a democracy stabilizer. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) indicate that democracy flourishes in those countries where civil society has overthrown the ruling elite and created conditions for equal economic and political rights.

The development of civil society relates to economic development and political institutionalization. Huntington (1968) emphasized the negative consequences of the growth of civic activity in the absence of the government's political capacity and stable economic indicators. In his opinion, the support of civil society in the context of the underdevelopment of political systems can give an unexpected result, leading to the complication rather than the consolidation of democracy. The growth of a capable civil society is impossible without political institutionalization or economic development.

### **Literature Review**

Civil society plays a significant role in strengthening democratic processes. However, civil society's conditions and level of influence depend on particular countries' economic and political situations. The reasons for the different levels of civil society are the level of public trust used by civil society organizations (and therefore the support and funding they can involve) and their engagement in partnerships with businesses and governments.

The interrelationship between civil society and democracy is also substantiated by empirical research. In their study, Dore and Jackson (2020) underscore the significance of statistical methodologies in exploring the causal link between civil society and democracy. Their findings reveal a positive correlation between heightened levels of civic participation and increased rates of political change in the United States and Western and Eastern Europe.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), established in 2015, has developed an institutional framework, and its formal objectives mirror those of the European Union (EU), striving to establish a unified market, harmonize regulations, and modernize member state economies (Braun et al., 2024).

All EAEU member states have authoritarian regimes, although some have democratic features, such as having more than one political party and periodic elections. According to Braun et al. (2024), EAEU member states have not made significant progress or improvements in democratic processes. None of the EAEU member states is considered an electoral democracy, and the protection of political and civil liberties in the EAEU generally remains quite low (Arynov et al., 2023). In the world rating of Freedom House (n.d.a.), the scores of freedoms of political and civil rights on a scale from 1 (the lowest level) to 100 (the highest level) were: the Republic of Armenia – 54, the Republic of Belarus – 8, the Republic of Kazakhstan – 23, the Kyrgyz Republic – 27, and the Russian Federation – 16.

Therefore, only the Republic of Armenia is classified as a state with partially free political and civil rights freedoms, while the remaining four EAEU member states could be listed under the “Not Free” category.

Indeed, the concept of civil society has evolved from being mere association platforms to encompassing a diverse array of organized and organic groups in various forms, functions, and sizes (VanDyck, 2017). Some scholars define civil society as an autonomous realm situated between society and the state that represents the interests of specific groups (Shah, 2019). Others suggest characterizing civil society based on four main components (Xu, 2022):

- Civil society as a public sphere – that is, civil society provides a space for discussions, debates, and communications about social problems that require solutions.
- Civil society as an association is the most general term to describe the context of civil society. Namely, civil society includes various groups, cohorts, associations, and their cooperation. Such cooperation takes the form of public organizations that have formal activity documents, charters, and members with different roles and are independent of the state.
- As civic involvement of citizens, neither public organizations nor the public sphere can exist without citizens’ active involvement, motivation to initiate changes, and participation in discussions and debates.
- Civic involvement includes two categories: the first is political participation, which refers to activity in political processes such as elections, political campaigns, protests, petition writing, and so on. The second is social participation, which refers to volunteering, fundraising, public discussions, and so on.

Researchers assert that civil society can manifest in various forms, ranging from institutionalized organizations that organize rallies and strikes to organizations engaged in political dialogues with the executive power. This involves participating in the development of political decisions, submitting proposals for legislative initiatives, and engaging in working groups (Dudouet and Pinckney, 2021).

### **Research Questions**

This study will answer the following main question:

- What is «civil society»?
- What is the level of development of civil society in the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union?
- What features of the development of democratic processes are taking place in the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union?
- What are the connections between the development of civil society and the development of democracy in the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union?

### **Research Objectives**

The research objectives highlight the following tasks:

- Pointing out the main features of the conception of «civil society».
  - Outlining the level of civil society development in the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union.
  - Determining the peculiarities of the development of democratic processes in the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union.
  - Identifying the connection between the development of civil society and the development of democracy in the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union.
- Proposing mechanisms for improving the formation of civil society to enhance democratic processes in society.

### **Research methods**

The research is grounded in data sourced from the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), comprising the Russian Federation, the Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Republic of Armenia. Core institutions of the EAEU include the EAEU Court, the Eurasian Supreme Council, the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council, and the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC).

In conducting this study, a systematic approach was employed to gather relevant literature and data pertaining to civil society and democratic processes within EAEU member states. The search strategy involved comprehensive exploration of scholarly databases, including but not limited to Scopus, Web of Science, Science Direct, Directory of Open Access Journals, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, using key search terms such as “civil society,” “democracy,” and “EAEU member states.”

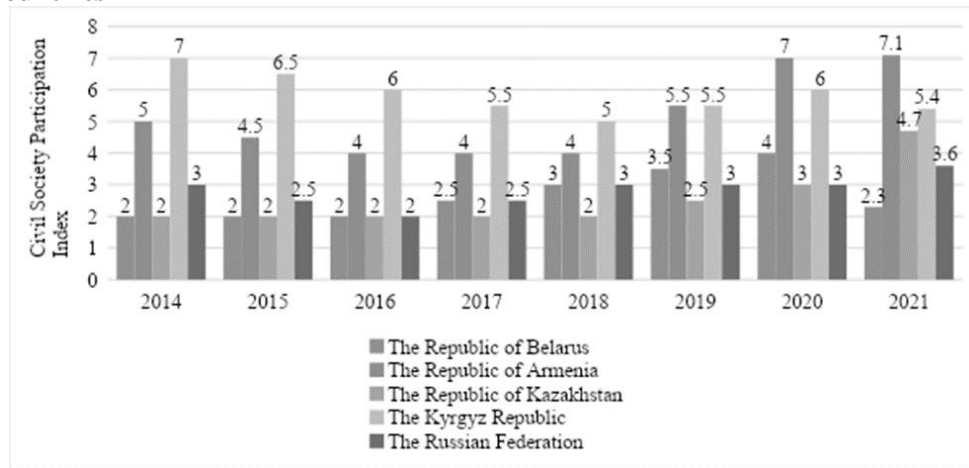
Inclusion criteria encompassed studies published in peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and reputable international organizations' publications, focusing on civil society dynamics and democratic indicators specific to EAEU countries.

Data extraction procedures involved meticulous review and synthesis of pertinent information, including civil society participation indices, democracy ratings, and indicators of political and civil liberties. Comparative analyses were conducted to discern patterns and correlations between civil society strength and democratic advancement across EAEU member states.

### **Results and Discussion**

The level of civil society in the EAEU countries gradually changed. Figure 2 demonstrates a comparative analysis of the level of civil society based on the Civil Society Participation Index from 2014 to 2021. The data is compiled by the World Bank, and the indicator is measured by the Transformation Index Network, which includes 248 experts from 129 countries. They evaluate how each country corresponds to 17 criteria (The World Bank, n.d.).

**Figure 2 Civil Society Participation Index in Eurasian Economic Union countries**



Source: The World Bank (n.d.)

In the Republic of Armenia, the country with the highest level of civic participation in 2020, compared to other countries, the level of civic participation increased every year. The country is transitioning following mass anti-government protests and elections in 2018, which ousted the entrenched political elite. The new government has promised to cope with long-standing problems, including systemic corruption, non-transparent politics, a flawed electoral system, and a weak rule of law. However, the country continues to severely suffer from the 2020 conflict with the Republic of Azerbaijan, which has been a months-long struggle for control of the Nagorno-Karabakh territory (Freedom House, n.d.b.). With the change of government in 2018, the level of civic participation in the Republic of Armenia has increased. In general, compared to previous years, the activity of the public sector in discussions and decision-making by the government has increased. The public image of civil society organizations has slightly improved (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2019). The appeared politically motivated public organizations also tried to participate in development and decision-making. According to the Ministry of Justice, 4,222 public organizations were registered in the Republic of Armenia, of which 15-20% were active at the end of 2018 (Freedom House, 2019). Since 2019, the transparency of the activities of public organizations has improved in the Republic of Armenia, in particular the financing of such organizations. In March 2019, the State Revenue Committee launched a standardized form of financial reporting for NGOs. Financial stability remains one of the biggest challenges for many organizations; only a few have reliable sources of income (Freedom House, 2019). In 2020, the effect of civil society was noticeable in the development of global trends related to the protection of the rights of certain categories of the population.

The legislative framework enables the registration of two types of organizations: membership-based public organizations, regulated by the Law on Public Organizations, and non-membership foundations, regulated by the Law on Foundations. The registration process for both is easy and straightforward. The laws also guarantee the independence of CSOs by restricting intervention in a CSO's internal affairs by the state or any third-party actor as long as the CSO complies with the law. An amendment to the Law on Public Organizations adopted in May 2021 allows CSOs to represent their constituencies in court in cases related to environmental protection and the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities (Strengthening Civil Society Globally, 2023).

In the Republic of Armenia, there is currently no established policy or strategy governing the collaboration between the state and civil society organizations (CSOs). Moreover, there is a lack of state strategies aimed at enhancing the advancement of CSOs, which would facilitate more efficient collaborations and collective endeavors for the expansion of the CSO sector. The existing framework for state-CSO cooperation is outlined in several laws and strategies that provide avenues for CSOs to engage in participatory processes.

The Kyrgyz Republic, which was named “the island of democracy” in the region and has one of the highest levels of democracy among the EAEU member states, tends to decrease the level of civic activity in the period 2014–2020 (Mostafa and Mahmood, 2018). This is connected with the political situation in the country. After the parliamentary elections, the ruling party consolidated power for several years, using the justice system to suppress political opponents and civil society critics.

It is possible to assert that the laws formally allow citizens to express their position. In particular, the law allows peaceful assembly, small-scale protests, and civil disobedience actions such as road blockades that occur regularly. Nevertheless, national and international observers have expressed concern about violations of the right to assembly, including arrests and other forms of intrusion. Far-right groups and criminal organizations have also been known to intimidate and attack protesters. In post-election protests in October 2020, more than 600 people were wounded in clashes within two days of the election, with one person killed (Freedom House, 2021a).

The legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic allows non-governmental organizations to take an active part in public and political life. Public advisory councils were established in parliament and most ministries in 2011, enabling organizations to improve monitoring and advocacy. However, human rights defenders, including those supporting victims of ethnic Uzbek and women's groups, face threats, harassment, and physical attacks. Ultranationalists persecuted American and European NGOs, as well as local partners perceived as favored by

foreign governments and donors (CIVICUS Monitor, 2022). Today, the number of registered public organizations in this country ranges from 8,000 to 12,000. The range of data varies because, according to current legal acts, the Ministry of Justice includes political parties in the category of “non-profit organizations”. Therefore, there is a debate about whether all non-profit organizations should be considered non-governmental public organizations (Asian Development Bank, 2011). The legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic anticipates the creation of trade unions, which, as a rule, could work without any obstruction. However, parliamentarians considered legislative amendments that limited their ability to organize and forced them to join the Federation of Trade Unions of the Kyrgyz Republic (FTUK), which acts as the country’s only national trade union. The amendments made in 2019 passed the second reading in November 2020. In many sectors, strikes are prohibited. Legislative protection of trade union rights is weak and employers do not always respect collective agreements (The Open Government Partnership and Margaryan, 2022).

In the Russian Federation, the independent public sector faces huge pressure from the state. The government regularly attempts to manage citizen participation through state-controlled political parties, government-organized organizations, and consultative bodies (e.g., the Civic Chamber). Financial stability has already been undermined by the ban on foreign funding and the regulation of political organizations. The government is also trying to minimize the effects of civil society organizations through the allocation of state and presidential grants and the creation of a platform of “State-organized NGOs” (Freedom House, 2021b).

In the Russian Federation, the activity of public organizations is limited by law. For example, on December 25, 2020, the current restrictive legislation regarding foreign agents was amended, according to which almost any citizen of the Russian Federation can be defined as a “foreign agent”. In 2021, the Ministry of Justice began to maintain two such registers of foreign agents: one for a non-governmental organization registered in the Russian Federation, and another for mass media. The definition of “political activity” in the statute is vague and allows authorities to consider a wide range of activities to be political, including publishing and sharing on the Internet, monitoring elections, and participating in protests. Aid from abroad now also includes “organizational and methodological assistance,” which potentially exposes any international contact to liability under foreign agent legislation (Freedom House, 2022a).

The situation is similar in the Republic of Belarus, where the government also controls civil society organizations. From 2014 to 2020, the level of civil society participation was relatively stable. The situation changed in 2020 in connection with mass protests against unfair electoral processes.

The Republic of Belarus is an authoritarian state in which elections are openly falsified, and civil liberties are severely restricted. In 2020, Oleksandr Lukashenko, who controls the army and security forces, suppressed a massive pro-democracy protest movement that was triggered by his re-election in a falsified presidential election. Since then, security forces have attacked and detained journalists and ordinary citizens who challenged the regime by protesting, reporting on events, or posting opinions online. Judiciary and other institutions are not independent and do not control Lukashenko's power (Freedom House, n.d.). Lukashenko's influence is manifested in the political, economic, judicial, and educational spheres. In January 2019, the government also set fines for demonstrations. The fee was supposed to cover the costs of police, medical support, and cleaning services. Administrative fines have been a key tool for punishing unauthorized street activity, while arrests have been used against protest leaders and prominent activists.

The Belarusian civil society sector operates in difficult legal, political, and economic conditions. The law that anticipated criminal liability for the activities of unregistered public organizations was repealed and replaced with a milder administrative ban. Now, activists from unregistered groups do not face prison terms, but they can still be fined. In 2019, there were reports of political pressure on independent trade unions and indiscriminate detention of members of the Roma minority (CIVICUS Monitor, 2021). Formally registering a public organization in the Republic of Belarus is possible. For example, according to official data, as of October 2019, there were more than 3,000 public associations, 15 political parties, and 28 trade unions in the Republic of Belarus (Ministry of Justice of Belarus, 2019). Also, the authorities formally invite civil society organizations to meetings with EU representatives, forums, panel discussions and so on, but they were not able to participate in all discussions.

In the Republic of Kazakhstan, the level of civil society has remained relatively stable since 2014, but in connection with the 2019 presidential elections, the level of public protest has increased, indicating the intensification of civic activism.

Civil society organizations and non-profit organizations of the Republic of Kazakhstan are a category that includes public associations, non-profit joint-stock consumer cooperatives, foundations, and religious associations (Iskakova et al., 2023). There is no formal definition of a public organization in the legislation. They comprise a wider range of organizations, including political parties, trade unions, professional and academic associations, and the media (Asian Development Bank, 2015). The level of civic activity changed in 2019, during the period when the presidential elections were held. The transition of power in 2019 triggered numerous demonstrations and social media campaigns appealing for political change. The level of civic activism has increased, but the consequences of the protests remain unchanged.



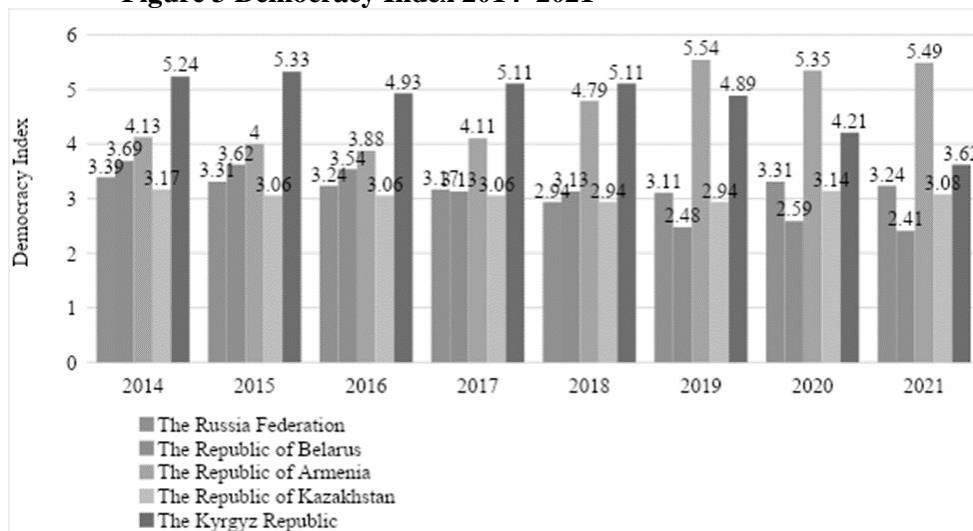
The status of public organizations has not changed either. Government policy concerning the public sector is aimed at greater formalization and control through harsher registration and reporting procedures, narrowing the space for independent public initiatives. The sector is financed mainly from state sources, which implies dependence rather than dialogue between the state and civil society (Gusarova, 2016). Even if the number of politically active citizens is increasing, state policy does not allow influencing decisions or participating in political processes.

In the Republic of Kazakhstan, accountability and transparency of government processes are also not at a competent level. A strong civil society and independent media can help solve this problem. However, civil society organizations and independent media face an increasingly complex environment and often struggle with financial problems. Another key obstacle to effective governance is the lack of an independent judiciary, which limits the country's ability to attract foreign investment and uphold the rule of law.

Akhmetov et al. (2018) assume that Kazakh society must build a democratic state by protecting and developing civil society institutions. After all, a democratic state can only be formed and established in a society based on a high legal culture and civil and political activity.

The democratic development of states correlates with the level of civil society. According to the Democracy Index 2021, the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Armenia have the highest level of democracy (see Figure 3). The Democracy Index assesses the state of democracy in 167 countries based on five indicators: the electoral process, government functioning, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.

**Figure 3 Democracy Index 2014–2021**



Source: The Economist Intelligence (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021)

The Russian Federation, the Republic of Belarus, and the Republic of Kazakhstan have the lowest level of democracy, as well as the lowest level of civil society. As the results show, the worst indicators regarding the existence of political and civil rights are in the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. «Voice of the people», that is, how the word «democracy» sounds in translation, is not heard in the mentioned countries. Their authoritarian regimes are so strong that they leave no room for the establishment and development of civil society institutions. The presence of the latter is a prerequisite for the formation and strengthening of a democratic system. In general, civil society creates conditions for the development of democracy, and democracy, on its part, provides a guaranteed space for civil activity, participation, and influence. This relationship is important for ensuring the sustainable development of society, strengthening democratic values, and, as a result, improving the quality of life of citizens.

In fostering democracy, civil society plays a pivotal role. It serves as a check against state abuses and authoritarian tendencies while enhancing governmental effectiveness. This delicate balance underscores the importance of civil society in shaping democratic processes and ensuring citizen welfare. We concur with Acemoglu and Robinson's (2019) position on this matter, recognizing the indispensable role civil society plays in advancing democracy across the EAEU member states. Moreover, we agree with Yelisseyeu's (2019) conclusion that a regional integration bloc could not be a realistic result based on the unification of non-democratic political regimes of the EAEU founding states. Our results correlate with Mazepus et al. (2021) who prove that the spheres of activity of public organizations related to the Russian Federation are mainly culture, religion, and higher education. Public figures of the Russian Federation promote narratives of historical memory, maintain ties with other countries on an ethnic and linguistic basis, and strive to return to the past from the socio-political order point of view. Such activities have mainly a negative impact from the standpoint of the development of democracy in the EAEU member states, with which the Russian Federation maintains close relations.

## **Conclusion**

Our study underscores the vital relationship between civil society and democracy in the EAEU countries. The development of civil society is intricately linked to the advancement of democracy, as evidenced by notable progress in the Republic of Armenia and the Kyrgyz Republic. These achievements, facilitated by supportive legislative frameworks, highlight the importance of legal mechanisms in fostering civil society growth and democratic values.

The dynamic interplay between civil society and the state has led to transformative shifts in political landscapes, increased transparency, and alignment

with global democratic trends. However, challenges persist, particularly in countries like the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, where restrictive legal frameworks impede civil society development and democratic progress.

To address these challenges, we propose several mechanisms for enhancing civil society formation, including normative and legal reforms, financial support, communicative engagement, and qualification enhancement. Implementing these mechanisms can empower civil society and promote active citizen participation, thereby advancing democracy.

In conclusion, our study emphasizes the importance of global efforts to combat challenges to civil society and democracy. Research plays a crucial role in understanding these issues and informing effective strategies for progress. By continuing to study and address these challenges, we can work towards a more inclusive and democratic society in the EAEU countries and beyond.

### **Recommendations**

This study recommends that:

- 1) Develop a legislative framework that will be understandable to both professional lawyers and ordinary citizens;
- 2) Develop and implement a long-term strategic program to counter legal nihilism;
- 3) Ensure the formation of basic legal knowledge in the professional field of each specialist (teacher, doctor, educator);
- 4) Develop activities for legal education of the population, especially in the educational environment. In the current education system (school-college-university), the academic discipline «Fundamentals of Law» is implemented in non-legal specialties, «Fundamentals of Jurisprudence», the volume of which cannot guarantee the acquisition of the necessary legal knowledge; therefore, an increase in the academic load seems simply necessary.

In connection with the above, we consider it necessary to supplement Section 7 «Legal Education, Legal Propaganda» of the Concept of Legal Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2030 with the following provisions:

- 1) Development and implementation of the «Program for the Formation and Improvement of the Level of Legal Culture of the Population» to prevent and combat legal nihilism among the population and improve the level of civil society.
- 2) In the educational sphere at all levels, inclusion in the curricula of a special educational cycle (discipline) – «Prevention of Legal Nihilism» or «Civic Education» already at the initial stage of school education.

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