



**Global Civil Society in a
Geopolitical Age:
How Civic Activism Is Being Reshaped
by Great Power Competition**

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The Carnegie Endowment thanks the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Ford Foundation for generous support that helps make the work of the Civic Research Network work possible. The views expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the authors alone.

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CIVIC RESEARCH NETWORK

The Carnegie Civic Research Network is a network of leading experts on civic activism, dedicated to examining the changing patterns of civic activism in their countries and analyzing the implications for a new generation of civil society assistance. Additional reports by the Civic Research Network include *Global Civic Activism in Flux* and *The Mobilization of Conservative Civil Society*.

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INTRODUCTION

RICHARD YOUNGS

Over the past ten years, the sharpening of geopolitical rivalries and tensions has come to dominate political, diplomatic, and analytic attention. Many analysts have mapped out the emergent era of great power competition. The ever-heightening U.S.-China rivalry is a primary area of concern, while friction between Russia and the West has now exploded from a smoldering worry into a raging war. Still other geopolitical rifts and contests, involving powers such as India, Pakistan, Turkey, the Gulf states, Iran, and others, are widely present across the international landscape.

There is widespread agreement that rising geopolitical competition is the defining feature of contemporary international relations. While interpretations differ over exactly what types of geopolitics are now most determinant and how they play out, few would question the trend toward less harmonious interstate dynamics. One aspect that has not received sustained attention, however, is what this trend implies at a nonstate or societal level.

More particularly, a crucial open question is how the geopolitical era affects global civil society. The geopolitical zeitgeist has focused analysis on government actions and tactics, and it has tilted much analysis of international relations back toward state-oriented concepts and frameworks. While analysts give some attention to the role of armed nonstate actors in geopolitical struggles, the broader role of civic actors in contemporary geopolitics is underanalyzed. It is generally taken as read that the emergent dynamics of a reshaped global order are driven mainly by states and security actors, with commercial entities adding a sharper geoeconomic logic. This report widens the lens and asks how far civic actors also need to be seen as part of the shifting geopolitical landscape. It examines the civil society dimension of geopolitics and delves into what might be termed an emergent civil society geopolitics.

The volume assesses this issue across several countries and regions. Two chapters look at Chinese cooperation with part of civil society in Taiwan and the rapprochement between China and conservative civil society in Thailand, respectively. Another chapter examines non-Western support for civil society across Africa and how African civic groups are reacting to this trend. Other contributions probe how the Turkish government attempts to use civic actors for strategic goals; how several powers have sought to use nonstate groups in conflicts in the Middle East; and how the broader range of local civil society organizations (CSOs) stands in relation to geopolitics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). A further contribution details the ways in which crises involving Belarusian and Ukrainian refugees have shifted civil society relations and agendas in Poland. The volume also considers the increasingly internationalized activities of U.S. conservative groups and the de facto export of U.S. political polarization to other countries. Another chapter explores perhaps the most dramatic case of all: the role of civil society dynamics in the war on Ukraine.

Of course, framing the volume in terms of civil society geopolitics immediately raises the question of what is meant by geopolitics. A huge amount of academic work over many years has offered differing understandings of this concept. Fairly narrow classical definitions centered on territorial control contrast with more modern or even postmodern conceptualizations that bring in a range of power strategies. This report adopts a relatively wide framework: it understands geopolitical activity as covering instrumental actions directed toward perceived strategic interests and the geographic extension of influence—involving the enhancement of both military and nonmilitary power.

To this end, the volume examines governments' use of civil society for strategic reasons and civil society's reactions to state geopolitics. The aim is not to develop a normative framework for how governments or CSOs should act in this changing international context but, rather, to develop the first incisive global look at the new realities of civil society as it lives and works in the shadow of great power competition.

FORMS OF CIVIL SOCIETY GEOPOLITICS

Across the very different case studies, we do not suggest there is one type of civil society geopolitics, nor do we presume the civil society dimensions of geopolitics are becoming especially far-reaching in any uniform sense. Rather, we seek to uncover different kinds and degrees of change through which global civil society is becoming geopoliticized. The case studies demonstrate that civil society geopolitics has multiple meanings in different regional and political contexts. Three particular aspects stand out.

Governments using civil society actors: While Western governments have long engaged with civil society to further their own interests, non-Western powers are now beginning to follow suit. They are moving to support civil society initiatives and actors for geopolitical purposes. For many years, civil society support was almost exclusively about Western donors funding civic groups as part of efforts to bolster democracy, rights, and development; now, other governments are engaging in such support for a very different set of values. Governments embroiled in geopolitical tensions and rivalry are seeking to employ civic actors as tools to advance their strategic goals. Civic groups face new pressures of being enlisted as adjuncts to interstate contestation.

The case studies distinguish between two different ways in which governments use civic actors. Some of these policies may be fairly *direct*, while other support is only *indirectly* geopolitical. Governments sometimes point their civil society support toward contributing to their goals in conflicts or crises in a directly instrumental fashion. Other times, they pursue more diffuse forms of influence through educational and cultural efforts.

Civil society links: In addition to government actions in relation to civil society, a different dynamic concerns the way civic actors relate to each other in response to geopolitical tensions and challenges. Some of the case studies focus on new links across borders among civic actors related to geopolitical dynamics. In an overlap with the first category, governments often support their national civil society partners expressly to build their own links with civil society in other countries. In other cases, civil society networks are relatively autonomous of direct government involvement and yet have clear repercussions for geopolitical interests and power relations. If the geopolitical era is about enhanced state power, it also entails politically oriented and thickened nonstate networks across borders.

Civil society repositioning: A final category refers to the way in which CSOs are changing their outlooks and strategies toward states and governments' geopolitical agendas. The case studies chart how CSOs are switching alliances and partners. As civil society becomes part of the geopolitical battleground, civic actors are shifting their strategies and even their core agendas. The nature of these shifts varies significantly across regions. Many civil society actors are becoming more cautious in their long-standing rights-oriented work because of geopolitical considerations. In other instances, they have moved to do the opposite: to harness geopolitical dynamics as a way of solidifying and projecting their focus on liberal and democratic values. In still other cases, they are trying to attenuate or simply keep out of geopolitical arenas.

Each of these dynamics has a different measure of relevance to each of the case studies, in the following ways.

Ming-sho Ho uncovers the tightening links between the Chinese regime and religious actors in Taiwan's civil society, in a case of combined direct and indirect strategies of government influence over civil society for geopolitical ends.

Janjira Sombatpoonsiri shows how royalist civic actors in Thailand have become more hostile to the United States and pro-U.S. policies and veered toward China and, latterly, Russia—an example of civil society repositioning that reflects a changed geopolitical context.

Nic Cheeseman examines how China and Russia have begun to broaden their activities across Africa to include the civil society sphere—a significant geopolitical change, even if this engagement is still fairly indirect and even covert in nature—while funding for religious groups is also becoming an externally fueled battleground.

Özge Zihnioğlu shows how the Turkish government increasingly uses civic actors in ways that indirectly further geopolitical aims and how Turkish CSOs are repositioning themselves as they row back from well-established agendas in reaction to the government's changing geopolitical stances.

Kristina Kausch looks at how the major powers in the MENA region have increasingly sought to instrumentalize civil society for geopolitical purposes and how CSOs have repositioned their strategies in response. Hafsa Halawa provides an additional MENA account to show how great powers have used nonstate actors with particular geopolitical intent in the region's conflict theaters.

Paweł Marczewski charts how geopolitical factors squeezed Polish CSOs' humanitarian operations to assist refugees at the Belarusian border but, in the case of Ukrainian refugees, gave the organizations' work a fillip. This provides an example both of geopolitics affecting government strategies toward civil society and of CSOs repositioning themselves in response to geopolitical crises.

Kateryna Zarembo details how Ukrainian civic actors have adapted their identities to play a more geopolitical role in the context of Russian attacks. While this has entailed some degree of instrumental use by the government, civic actors have needed little prompting in this geopolitical shift.

Finally, Ben Press shows how conservative-illiberal civic actors in the United States have built links with counterparts in other countries, often against U.S. government aims, in an example of civil society links with international political ramifications.

GEOPOLITICIZATION LITE

The case studies illustrate various ways in which geopolitical tensions are having an impact on civil society around the world and point toward what could become a taxonomy of civil society geopolitics. Strategic competition between governments is leaving its mark at the societal level. The age of competitive and fractious international politics plays out not only in relations among governments but also in the civic sphere. While nondemocratic and non-Western powers traditionally confined themselves to building relations with governments, they have begun to seek out alliances with civil society. Many civic actors are being drawn into geopolitical competition. At the same time, some of them are adjusting their focus and activities in an effort to attenuate the negative impacts of great power rivalries.

Yet, the chapters reveal that this trend is in many places only embryonic and partial. Civil society is not fully geopoliticized. Indeed, in some cases, it is perhaps surprising it has not become more deeply geopolitical. Trends are for the moment balanced. Key powers are moving to increase their presence in and influence over civil society but do not fully see civic actors as assets in their geopolitical rivalries. China and other authoritarian powers have not yet harnessed civil society partnerships in any highly instrumentalized manner. In many instances, civil society is becoming geopoliticized but in relatively indirect ways.

Still, there are signs that civil society may be heading in a more political direction. This implies that civil society may become another layer of global geopolitics in the future. An emerging paradox is that nondemocratic regimes engaged in quashing civil society internally are using civic actors abroad. Related to this, trends point toward less liberal forms of civil society gaining traction—that is, a global civil society that is not so much about limiting the state as about working with it on geopolitical aims.

Global civil society came of age in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, when democracy was rapidly expanding and, globally, great power competition was at a dramatic low after many decades of bipolar superpower rivalry. These features strongly marked both transnational and domestic civil society groups as they mushroomed across the world. Both the spread of liberal values and the relatively open international terrain shaped how these groups organized themselves, how they carried out their work, and what goals they pursued. As these overarching features have given way to more combative international relations and struggles over values, the contours of global civil society have begun to shift.

Yet, these new realities of civil society life in the shadow of heightened geopolitical competition have not yet been systematically charted. The aim of this study is to probe this emerging situation with analytic clarity and empirical detail, looking across a wide range of regional and country contexts. The trends are not yet defined with any precision, but it is clear that there will be more crossover in the future between geopolitical and societal developments. Geopolitics will shape civil society, and civil society will influence geopolitics. Global civil society will be both an object of great power competition and a subject that is itself more deeply involved in geopolitics.

CHAPTER 1

CHINA'S INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS AMONG TAIWAN'S RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

MING-SHO HO

Taiwan is a vibrant democracy whose existence faces a constant threat from the People's Republic of China (PRC), which claims the self-governing island as an integral part of its territory.¹ In the 1990s, Beijing used military interventions and verbal threats to intimidate Taiwan but failed to stop the island nation's march toward democracy. As a result, Beijing had to devise a less coercive approach toward its stated goal of annexation. The PRC therefore began to target nonstate actors with its time-honored strategy of so-called united front work, through which China makes political use of rifts among its adversaries by befriending its minor enemies and isolating its major ones.²

By pursuing strategies like encircling politics with business (*yishang weizheng*), promoting unification via economics (*yijing cutong*), and pressuring officials via the people (*yimin biguan*), the PRC targeted Taiwan's economic actors, including business investors in China and domestic agricultural producers. Beijing's economic united front work aimed to cultivate a group of collaborators whose interests and political loyalty would be permanently linked to China's growing prosperity.³ The PRC also set its eyes on civil society actors, including the media, university students, labor unions, and neighborhoods in the hope that less obtrusive influence campaigns among these groups might result in a broader reception for Beijing's political agenda.

The most active sector of Taiwanese civil society consists of faith communities and their organizations. Despite its democratic progress, Taiwan has not emerged as a nation of joiners: a 2012 survey indicated that only 36.7 percent of Taiwanese were members of a voluntary association, far behind their democratic East Asian neighbors in Japan (82.9 percent) and South Korea (76.1 percent). The most popular voluntary associations among the Taiwanese were religious organizations, in which 12.1 percent of survey respondents were members, followed by recreational organizations (11.2 percent).⁴ Taiwan's vibrant religious life emerged as a result of the island's democracy; yet Taiwanese leaders and faith communities became the prime targets of China's influence campaigns for geopolitical ends.

CHINA'S CONTROLLING APPROACH TO RELIGION

The PRC's evolving religious policy indicates a learning curve for an expanding authoritarian regime. The PRC began with an aggressive program to eradicate existing religions, culminating in iconoclastic violence during the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution. Communist leaders after Mao Zedong were less repressive but still insisted that religious practices be aligned with state goals. Independent religious organizations were not tolerated, and the management of temples was placed firmly in the hands of local officials. Religion, then, is a noteworthy arena that showcases how PRC leaders started from an atheist persuasion and proceeded to perfect the art of controlling religions and transforming them to enable authoritarian expansion over time.

PRC officials did not even attempt to disguise their instrumental attitude toward religion, which is reflected in the popular saying “Build a religious stage to sing an economic opera.” PRC officials often doubled as delegates of religious organizations to enable their political outreach. For instance, the former director of the Chinese State Administration for Religious Affairs, Ye Xiaowen, visited Taiwan several times as chair of the Chinese Religious and Cultural Exchange Association. As for the purpose of these religious exchanges, Ye was explicit:

Religions have unique advantages, and they can narrow the distance between people on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait and facilitate cross-strait exchanges. . . . Based on existing foundations, we need to promote cross-strait religious exchanges, especially in Buddhism and Taoism, to unify [our] Taiwanese compatriots and deter the secessionist activities of the Taiwanese independence movement for the sake of peace [across] the Taiwan Strait.⁵

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The Taiwanese are not known for their religious fervor or piety. Secularism—in the sense of the separation of church and state—is widely accepted. Modern Taiwan is rich in faith diversity, however: in a 2020 survey, 22.9 percent of respondents said they followed popular religion, 19.8 percent Buddhism, 18.7 percent Taoism, and 6.9 percent Christianity, while 24.0 percent had no particular religious belief.⁶ The term popular religion denotes an ecosystem of dispersed worship of deities, centered on community temples. Beijing sees Taiwan's spiritual followers as soft targets to spread its influence, so long as it crafts suitable messaging for each religion.

POPULAR RELIGION: THE MAKING OF A CULTURAL-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Without a central authority to systematize its teaching, popular religion freely borrows elements from Buddhism and Taoism to the extent that its boundaries are always blurry. It is plausible that many of the 2020 survey respondents who identified as Buddhists or Taoists are unwittingly followers of popular religion. The Taiwanese worship Mazu, Guan Yu, Lord Protectors (*wangye*), and other deities whose influences mostly came from mainland China through migration from the seventeenth century onward.

Popular religion is largely apolitical, yet it has sustained a contentious relationship with the government. During the 1937–1945 Sino-Japanese War, the colonial government banned the practice of popular religion in an effort to assimilate the polytheistic Taiwanese into Japanese Shintoism. The postwar authoritarian government also placed stringent restrictions on religion in the name of suppressing superstition and encouraging thrift. Still, popular religion survived these hostilities and prospered with Taiwan's growing affluence, and after the demise of authoritarian rule in 1980, it emerged as a powerful political force. The management of temples has traditionally been in the hands of local community leaders, and democratization allowed them a larger political space.

While the vitality of popular religion came to symbolize the spirit of the Taiwanese, religious leaders were keen on exchanges with their Chinese counterparts. Temples are interconnected through the practice of dividing incense—a ritual by which worshippers in one temple take ash of incense and use it to establish an affiliated shrine at another location—and original temples are believed to have higher standing and greater religious efficacy. Since the late 1980s, Taiwan's temples have organized tours for worshippers to visit the places in China from which their deities originated, in violation of the law. A Taiwanese donation helped rebuild dilapidated temples in China and revived ritual practices. Meizhou in China's Fujian province, for instance, was the birthplace of sea goddess Mazu and quickly emerged as a mecca for Taiwan's believers.⁷

PRC officials noted this influx of money and worshippers, even though popular religion was not listed among China's officially recognized religions. Seeing these religious sites as an attraction for the Taiwanese and for overseas investors as well as for tourists, local officials encouraged the revival of popular religion in China.⁸ In 2006, the PRC legalized the Chinese Mazu Cultural Exchange Association, which included representatives from Taiwan's temples. This organization has become one of the conduits through which Taiwanese temple leaders build personal connections with PRC officials—a vital resource for business success in China.

Some Taiwanese temples were allowed to build branch temples on the mainland, which often generated considerable profits in land redevelopment. As such, a cross-strait Mazu cultural-industrial complex emerged, which involved an opaque mixture of political power and economic interests.⁹ Taiwan's participating temples also hosted visiting PRC officials and arranged visits to other temples, thereby spreading the web of united front work across Taiwan. However, as these events were not public, outsiders often did not know what happened in these closed-door meetings.¹⁰

BUDDHISM: EYEING THE CHINESE RELIGIOUS MARKET

The idea of socially engaged Buddhism was first conceived in China's republican era in the first half of the twentieth century, but only came to fruition in postwar Taiwan. Political stability and economic prosperity made possible a flourishing of so-called Humanist Buddhism, which attracted many middle-class followers in Taiwan.¹¹ The four leading Humanist Buddhist organizations are Tzu Chi, Buddha Light Mountain, Chung Tai Chan Monastery, and Dharma Drum Mountain.

Tzu Chi was the only major Buddhist organization founded by native Taiwanese. It has a markedly secular orientation and concentrates on charity, education, and healthcare. Tzu Chi has asserted its neutrality between Taiwan and China and carefully avoided taking a political stance in the dispute. Nevertheless, Tzu Chi pioneered disaster relief after the 1991 floods in eastern China. To help the victims, the organization launched a donation campaign, which faced criticism in Taiwan for aiding a hostile force. Tzu Chi leaders insisted that Buddhist compassion transcended the political divide across the Taiwan Strait. In its subsequent relief efforts in China, the organization opted for a less high-profile strategy, and more funding was raised locally. Because of its leading role in disaster relief, Tzu Chi was among the first foreign charity groups that were allowed to operate in China. As such, the group was able to establish several operating centers and recruited local volunteers for its charity and environmental protection activities.¹²

The founders of Buddha Light Mountain and Chung Tai Chan Monastery were Chinese mainlanders who fled with the nationalist government to Taiwan in 1949. Once the subsequent ban on travel to China was lifted in 1987, they were eager to spread their Buddhist teachings on the mainland, and with the PRC's approval, both organizations established branches in major Chinese cities. Both Buddhist leaders embraced a strong Chinese identity and were outspoken in their opposition to Taiwan's growing indigenous identity and the movement for a de jure independent Taiwanese state—very likely the reason why both organizations were allowed to host educational and cultural activities in China. Both have been active participants in the forums held by the PRC's official Buddhist organizations since 2006. Once Chinese citizens were allowed to visit Taiwan in 2008, many tourist groups visited Buddha Light Mountain and Chung Tai Chan Monastery.

PROTESTANTISM: PRESSURED BY TAIWAN'S CULTURAL WAR

Christians in postwar Taiwan have been the best-treated believers, because the island's authoritarian rulers have relied heavily for their survival on the United States, where Christianity is the majority religion. Protestant and Catholic churches were allowed to operate schools and universities in Taiwan from very early on, while this privilege was denied to Buddhist and other religious groups until the mid-1990s. Taiwan's Christians continued to maintain links with their Western counterparts and thus represented a more modernized version of the faith when the PRC relaxed its repression of Christians in the 1980s. Like Taiwan's Buddhist leaders, Protestants were keen to explore China's vast emerging religious market. Since the 1990s, Taiwanese church leaders have been going to China on proselytizing missions, bringing material resources like Bibles and institutions such as fellowships to the mainland to help attract young, urban, and educated believers.¹³

However, the PRC government continued to distrust Chinese Christians because their faith was not homegrown. Except for officially sanctioned patriotic churches that professed loyalty to the Communist leadership, Christians had to congregate illegally in their homes, earning their gatherings the name

“underground churches.” Taiwan’s Protestant leaders initially contacted these persecuted underground believers, but over the years, they drew closer to the PRC’s official policy of condemning unrecognized underground churches as an evil cult.

One of the major push factors behind this conservative turn had to do with the emergence of LGBTQ politics in Taiwan, which posed a threat to the Christian view of the family and triggered rounds of large-scale mobilization and electioneering by Taiwan’s conservative Christians.¹⁴ In campaigning against the impending legalization of same-sex marriage, conservative Christians claimed to be defending traditional marriage by emphasizing the Confucian values of family piety. Starting in 2013, Taiwan’s conservative churches joined the annual Cross-strait Christian Forum, which invited only patriotic churches from the mainland. Pressured by a cultural war of social values at home and drawn by a PRC regime that has abandoned the universalist ideology of socialist revolution and gravitated toward traditional Confucianism, Taiwan’s Protestant leaders mostly opted for a collaborative stance with the PRC authorities.

CONCLUSION

Research on China’s influence campaigns has focused on identifying local collaborative agents and the incentives that induce them to accommodate Beijing’s agenda.¹⁵ This chapter has developed a more sophisticated picture of the ways in which Taiwan’s religious leaders have responded to Beijing’s charm offensives. Taiwan-based actors initiated cross-strait exchanges and, to that end, became willing to collaborate with the PRC authorities to varying degrees. When the travel ban from Taiwan to China was lifted in the late 1980s, Taiwan’s religious organizations enjoyed a tremendous advantage over their counterparts in China, which have not fully recovered from violent persecution and isolation. With Mandarin Chinese as their shared language, Taiwanese Buddhist and Protestant leaders were poised to tap into the vast religious market in China, while leaders of popular religion were motivated by concerns of temple prestige and religious efficacy.

These motives on the part of Taiwan’s religious leaders are complex and relate to interests that, following a distinction made by sociologist Max Weber, can be either material or ideal.¹⁶ While material interests are more or less straightforward and can be measured in monetary terms, ideal interests are more complicated as they are shaped by contending worldviews. Taiwan’s religious leaders pursued several ideal interests, including in the fields of religion, specifically temple prestige, influence, and proselytizing; political identity; and the culture war, namely family values (see table 1). A plethora of interests—religious and nonreligious, legal and illicit, monetary and reputational—encouraged Taiwan’s religious leaders to enter into different forms of collaboration with PRC officials, either willingly or inadvertently enabling their united front work.

TABLE 1.

Interests of Taiwan's Religious Leaders in Taiwan and China

	Material Interests	Ideal Interests
In Taiwan	Popular religion: temple donation	Popular religion: temple prestige, religious efficacy Buddhists: supporting unification Protestants: defending traditional family values
In China	Popular religion: land development, temple donation	Buddhists: influence, charity projects Protestants: proselytizing

The PRC's influence campaigns are embedded in the configuration of religious actors' material and ideal interests, which constitute the vulnerabilities of Taiwanese civil society, because its leaders seek to expand their influence and material benefits in mainland China. If PRC officials can deploy incentives in both Taiwan and China, and if more interests are involved in the transactions between the PRC authorities and religious leaders, civil society actors are likely to be more compliant with Beijing's political agenda. This explains why Taiwan's popular religion is more susceptible to the PRC's united front strategy than is Buddhism or Christianity.

The Taiwanese case study also has broader implications. Recently, the PRC incorporated its religious united front work into its massive Belt and Road Initiative. This initiative explicitly weaponizes the Mazu cult as a form of outreach toward the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia as well as Chinatown residents in Western cities.¹⁷ In other words, what has happened in Taiwan is likely to be reproduced elsewhere in the world.

Looking ahead, how can Taiwan's democracy defend itself against influence and manipulation by a hostile dictatorship? By definition, a democracy has to respect citizens' choice of faith, and any governmental intervention is always suspicious. Taiwan's authoritarian past makes tighter regulation morally questionable. Yet the irony is that the authoritarian PRC controls religions within its borders and simultaneously deploys them to achieve its geopolitical goals abroad.

As of 2021, Taiwan had more than 12,000 temples, but only a tiny portion of them are officially registered.¹⁸ Not all temples release financial statements, which makes them easy channels for money laundering and potential recipients of PRC funding. Legislation on financial transparency is underway in Taiwan, but resistance is stiff because temples are typically led by powerful politicians. Religious followers can also be a source of deterrence for the PRC's influence campaigns. More public exposure of the illicit dealings of Taiwan's religious leaders could generate stronger immunity to Chinese influence. A healthy religious market in which different faiths and persuasions compete for believers is an antidote, too. For instance, aside from Humanist Buddhism, which has Chinese roots, Taiwan has many followers of Tibetan Buddhism, who are unlikely to accept Beijing's propaganda at face value. In short, Taiwan will need to learn the art of democratic self-defense without abrogating freedom of religion.

CHAPTER 2

THAILAND'S ROYALIST CIVIL SOCIETY AND ANTI-AMERICAN TURN

JANJIRA SOMBATPOONSIRI

Royalist, right-wing civic networks in Thailand represent the way in which the country's civil society actors have repositioned their allegiances with great powers in light of a changing geopolitical landscape. Ideologically, Thailand's royalist activists subscribe to royal nationalism centered on the supremacy of the monarchy as a marker of national identity. The emergence of royalist networks was shaped by the U.S.-led countercommunism effort in Southeast Asia from the 1950s to the 1970s. The royalists, in turn, endorsed the United States as an international partner in the face of democratic challenges from the Left.

However, this ideological proximity changed after the Cold War, when royalist networks began to see the United States' global promotion of democracy as fostering Thailand's domestic pro-democracy struggle. Royalist media outlets and activists have increasingly adopted an anti-American position and pivoted toward China and, recently, Russia as forces that counteract the United States. This change in royalist networks' approach to geopolitics has been seen most clearly in their endorsements of China's COVID-19 vaccine in 2021 and of Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine in 2022.

U.S. COUNTERCOMMUNIST CAMPAIGNS AND THAILAND'S ROYALIST CIVIC NETWORKS

Anti-Americanism among Thailand's royalist groups today contrasts starkly with their staunch support for the United States' efforts in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. At that time, royalist support in Thailand stemmed from perceived external and internal threats to the country's monarchy. Externally, Southeast Asia after World War II was mired in episodes of political turmoil, in which communist movements challenged and, in some cases, ousted governments friendly to the United States.

The then Thai government was alarmed by sweeping communist influence—a concern shared by Washington, which implemented policies to contain so-called communist dominoes. Through massive financial support, covert operations, and bilateral agreements, the United States ensured the staying power of Thailand’s monarchy-military nexus. In return, Thailand hosted U.S. military bases and helped suppress communism in the country. Royalist civic groups participated actively in these efforts by countering local protests against U.S. army bases and joining forces with the government to quell leftist democratic movements.

The proliferation of royalist activism in this period was also a response to growing dissent against the royalist elites. The security apparatus—especially the notorious Internal Security Operations Command and Border Patrol Police—founded, trained, and instrumentalized various right-wing royalist groups in information operations against the Communist Party of Thailand and its mass sympathizers.¹⁹

Clashes between left- and right-wing supporters came to a head in the late 1970s, when antigovernment protesters demanded the United States withdraw its troops from Thailand, among other calls for political change. However, royalist groups attributed the palace’s survival to the presence of U.S. troops in the country and therefore did not subscribe to the protesters’ agenda. From this historical perspective, the fault line between Thailand’s pro- and anti-U.S. stances was demarcated between right-wing royalist and left-wing democratic movements, respectively.

THE END OF ROYALIST ALIGNMENT WITH THE UNITED STATES

The changing global order after the Cold War prompted royalist networks to reposition their relations with the United States. The end of the war, followed by speculation about what political scientist Francis Fukuyama called the “end of history,” meant that Washington no longer needed deterrence in Southeast Asia against its Soviet rival; the geopolitical utility of Thai royalist networks waned accordingly.²⁰ Most importantly, Thailand seemed to be on course for democratization after the country’s 1992 democratic opening. However, as pro-democracy forces were seen as a threat to the monarchy, this democratic experiment was short-lived.

Since 2005, Thailand has been embroiled in political conflicts that divide political actors into pro- and antiestablishment blocs. In this light, royalist groups have been remobilized in alliance with various elite actors to defend the crown. These groups’ offline and online activism seeks to monitor and flag antimonarchy content on social media, penalize violators of monarchy-related laws, counter antiestablishment protests, and aid the autocratic regime in undermining opposition parties. These groups include ultraroyalist wings in the People’s Alliance for Democracy and the former People’s Democratic Reform Committee, various civic groups, royalist media outlets, and royalist celebrities.

Royalists Against Regime Change

While this new generation of royalist activists remains committed to defending the monarchy, they diverge from their Cold War predecessors in their hostility toward the United States. From the 1990s

to the early 2000s, the United States' ideological triumph and international legitimacy paved the way for the country to spearhead the liberal global order without substantive challenges from other major powers. On the one hand, this legitimacy enabled the U.S.-led promotion of global democracy and human rights. In Thailand, this backdrop arguably benefited the country's democratic development in the 1990s. On the other hand, the neoliberal economic framework and U.S. military adventurism in, for instance, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya created a backlash against the United States as a perpetrator of neocolonialism—an accusation common among civic groups in the Global South.

Thailand's royalist groups go one step further, contending that the United States masterminds democratic regime change across the globe to sustain its hegemony. Unlike royalist rhetoric during the Cold War, which commended the United States for defending the Thai establishment and national security, the current mood suspects that U.S.-led democracy promotion threatens elite interests that equate to Thai sovereignty.

This narrative circulated on the internet after the 2014 military putsch and gained traction from 2020 onward amid antiestablishment demonstrations. For instance, the Thai Move Institute and its affiliated online outlets fanned the rhetoric that leading protesters in 2020 used funding from the United States to attack and attempt to overthrow the monarchy; this narrative has been reproduced in the *Global Times*, a Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece.²¹ A similar allegation was often directed at the former opposition Future Forward Party, which was portrayed as serving U.S. interests at the expense of the Thai monarchy.²² This narrative is spread widely on the Facebook pages of royalist groups, where it shapes coordinated royalist campaigns against nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) accused of receiving Western money.

CHINA AND RUSSIA AS ANTIDOTES TO THE UNITED STATES

Over the past decade, Thailand's royalist groups have looked to China and, to a lesser degree, Russia as friendly big brothers who, unlike the United States, respect Thai-style democracy—a euphemism for authoritarianism backed by the military and the monarchy. Especially the fraternity with China has cultural roots because of a large Chinese diaspora in Thailand and a long history of economic and political exchanges between the two countries.

Although the cordial relationship was disrupted after the Communist Party took over China in 1949, it resumed in the late 1970s and grew stronger mainly through trade and, recently, China's Belt and Road Initiative. This rapprochement led Chinese President Xi Jinping and former Thai prime minister Prayut Chan-ocha, leader of the 2014 coup, to characterize Thailand and China as “one family,” reinforcing the old saying that China and Thailand are “kith and kin.”²³

While focusing on strengthening its diplomatic relations with the Thai regime and business leaders, Beijing has recently tried to consolidate its soft power in at least two areas. The first is education: Thai universities host more Confucius Institutes than any other country in Asia.²⁴ University exchanges have also led to massive numbers of Chinese students enrolling in Thai universities each year, while Mandarin has become one of the most studied foreign languages in Thai schools and colleges.²⁵

The second area of Chinese soft power is the media. Among other forms of economic cooperation that the Belt and Road Initiative offers, Thailand, as a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, signed a media and information cooperation agreement with China in 2015, making the Thai media landscape increasingly susceptible to Chinese content. For instance, China provides Thai television stations with free content from the party-controlled outlets Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television.

Despite these burgeoning people-to-people interactions, there is no evidence of China's official endorsement of royalist groups, apart from commentary on Thailand's antiestablishment protests that is reminiscent of royalist rhetoric. This is likely because, unlike in the cases of Hong Kong and Taiwan, China does not view Thailand as its own territory. Moreover, Thailand's political situation is volatile; the opposition that the royalists are up against today may be in government tomorrow. Walking a tightrope, China might choose to engage primarily with the government of the day.

Compared with China, Russia has even more limited penetration into Thai civil society, despite historical ties between the Chakri and Romanov dynasties and, lately, revived military and economic bilateral relations. A 2016 survey showed that Thai respondents understood Russian influence in economic rather than cultural terms.²⁶ Russia's role in the Thai information landscape emerged in light of the 2014 coup, when the Facebook pages of news outlets with links to Russian actors allegedly orchestrated disinformation campaigns in Thailand.²⁷ Information-based cooperation has increased in the wake of Russia's war in Ukraine. Royalist outlets have borrowed talking points from Russia's pro-regime media. In March 2022, the Russian Embassy in Bangkok met top brasses of the army-owned Channel 5.²⁸ Despite these efforts, Russia's direct connection with royalist civic groups remains limited.

The near absence of organized support from China and Russia for Thailand's royalist groups contrasts markedly with the royalists' enthusiastic endorsement of these countries. As such, instead of concrete forms of backing from these autocratic powers, royalist support should be understood from the perspective of having a common enemy. Royalist groups despise the United States, which is seen as an extension of the Western imperialism that threatens Thai sovereignty. The royalists have therefore aligned themselves with those powers that rise up against the United States.

VACCINE POLITICS AND SUPPORT FOR RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE

Vaccine politics during Thailand's worst coronavirus wave in 2021 and Russia's war in Ukraine in 2022 exemplify the way in which royalists' anti-U.S. sentiment underpins their pivot toward the two autocratic powers. Thailand's coronavirus vaccine rollout initially prioritized the shots manufactured by Sinovac and AstraZeneca, with the latter produced domestically by pharmaceuticals company Siam Bioscience, owned by Thai King Maha Vajiralongkorn. As the Delta variant of COVID-19 drove tens of thousands of cases of the virus per day in 2021—in contrast to almost no cases in late 2020—large parts of the public blamed the wave on the government's vaccine mismanagement, which had resulted in the delayed manufacture of AstraZeneca jabs.²⁹ As a result, Thais were stuck with China's Sinovac, which was known to be ineffective against the Delta variant.³⁰

In this context, while opposition politicians and antiestablishment supporters criticized the government, they also denounced Sinovac and demanded the import of mRNA vaccines, which are believed to be more effective against the Delta variant. In early September 2021, a group of Thai celebrities publicly criticized Sinovac. Chinese netizens subsequently wanted to ban these celebrities from Chinese media. Eventually, the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok posted on its Facebook page a message condemning people who “devalued and slandered [the Sinovac vaccine] without reason.”³¹

Royalist groups in Thailand were quick to side with China while trying to flood anti-Sinovac messages on social media with anti-U.S. content. The civic group Thai Raksa Chart, for instance, apologized to Thailand’s “Chinese brothers and sisters,” insisting that “[the group] loves and is sincere to the Chinese people.”³² Two representatives of the group held up placards near the Chinese embassy in support of Sinovac.³³ Pro-regime celebrities and academics followed by publicly apologizing to China on behalf of the Thai people. Moreover, in September 2021, the Thai Move Institute acknowledged China’s success in containing the coronavirus and thanked the Chinese government for supporting Thailand’s fight against the pandemic. A royalist mouthpiece, *The Truth*, also praised China—and, at times, Russia—for its “generosity” in donating vaccines to various developing countries.³⁴

In highlighting why, in their view, China was more effective than the United States in tackling the coronavirus, royalist groups portrayed the United States as incapable of solving the economic and health crises that were perpetuating nationwide unrest and discrimination against Asians, including Thai Americans. In addition, the royalists criticized the West, led by the United States, for its “selfishness” in hoarding vaccines for its own populations.³⁵ mRNA vaccines took a hit in the information war as royalist outlets repeatedly publicized the vaccines’ alleged deadly side effects compared with those of Sinovac. Relatedly, royalist media helped fan the conspiracy theories that the United States, rather than China, was the origin of the coronavirus and that the pandemic was premeditated to profit U.S. Big Pharma companies.

Royalist support for Russia’s war in Ukraine further reflects this interplay between anti-Americanism and the endorsement of major autocratic powers. Royalist resentment toward the United States is shaped by the perception that Washington masterminds antiestablishment movements in Thailand at the expense of the country’s monarchy. Because of the United States’ historical relations with the Thai royalist elites, many royalists express their disappointment at the erosion of the Thai-U.S. alliance.

Through this historical lens, members of the royalist intelligentsia, such as Anon Sakworawit, claim that Thailand during the Cold War was in a position similar to Ukraine today: “We sided with [the Americans], allowing their military bases in our country . . . but when they lost the Vietnam War, they left us to deal with the communist threat alone. . . . The Americans could not help us. Eventually [the then Thai prime minister] Krukrit [Pramot] got help from China. . . . The Americans betrayed us.”³⁶ Anon has speculated that the United States will at some point abandon Ukraine as it once abandoned Thailand.

No longer Thailand’s friend, the United States is then blamed for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine that began in February 2022. Royalists believe that the U.S. interventionist doctrine led to Ukraine’s decision to seek membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). By considering Ukraine part

of Russia's territory, rather than a sovereign country, royalists justify Russia's war as the rightful defense of national interests against U.S. meddling. Based on a topsy-turvy logic that omits the history of the Soviet empire, many Thai royalists link Russia's war in Ukraine with the fight against the United States and Western colonialism in which, the royalists argue, the Global South, including Thailand, should join forces.

For instance, on the eve of the invasion, the leader of the Rubbish Collection Organization, Rienthong Naenna, praised Putin as "brave and decisive."³⁷ Meanwhile, *Top News*, a royalist television news program broadcast on YouTube and Channel 5, lamented that the thirty-five countries that had abstained from a United Nations vote to condemn Russia in March 2022 were victims of a U.S. empire. Royalists praised these countries' abstentions as a courageous struggle against U.S. imperialism and painted Russia as sympathetic toward these smaller nations.³⁸

Nonetheless, royalist media outlets believe that U.S. colonialism is declining and that Washington therefore lacks an incentive to back Ukraine. Royalists highlight the failure of sanctions against Russia, the detrimental side effects of these measures on the U.S. and European economies, the sanctions' ability to fan the flames of domestic grievances, Russia's military and nuclear superiority over the West, and the West's abandonment of Ukraine. Rather than embrace Russia alone, royalist groups also point out that underdog countries like North Korea and the Gulf states are rallying behind Putin.

Ultimately, Thailand's royalists counter the U.S. decline with the rise of illiberal, autocratic powers like Russia and China. In the face of Western sanctions, royalist mouthpieces consider Putin a strong leader and Russia a powerful country with strong allies such as China—and, sometimes, India. Autocratic decisiveness in striking enemies both inside and outside Russia explains why, for the royalists, Putin will thrive in this ideological battle. According to this narrative, Putin was right to crack down on pro-peace NGOs and pro-U.S. media. The war in Ukraine, similarly, allows Russia to "denazify armed NGOs" such as the Azov Regiment, which has been funded by the United States, according to Thai royalist groups.³⁹ Although the outcome of the war remains to be seen, the royalists insist that Russia is winning. For them, decisive and ruthless leadership is needed for a new world order.

CONCLUSION

The convergence between Thailand's domestic political struggle and global dynamics has shaped Thai royalists' hostility toward the United States. In contrast to the Cold War era, when Washington was seen as a guarantor of the status quo based on the military and the monarchy, the United States' promotion of global democracy now makes the country appear as a threat. Thailand's royalist groups explicitly support China and Russia as an antidote to the United States.

This development coincides with growing discontent with the global liberal order not only in the Global South but also in the United States and Europe, with significant geopolitical ramifications. The end of the Cold War signified the ideological victory of political and economic liberalism spearheaded by the United States. But this hegemony has been challenged since the early 2000s, as Washington and the broader

West have been embroiled in a series of military, economic, and political crises at home and abroad. Domestically, illiberal forces have pushed back against liberal policies by exploiting identity politics. Internationally, in the aftermath of the global war on terrorism and multiple revolutions that toppled autocrats, many in the Global South have contested democracy and human rights rhetoric by linking it with neocolonialism. The eroding legitimacy of the global liberal order opens up an opportunity for great powers such as China to offer an alternative order that diverges from a Western model and prioritizes sovereignty over universal values.

Thai royalists are not alone in repositioning their allegiances toward great powers. In Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore, for instance, political groups including religious radicals, academics, and netizens express anti-U.S. sentiment in light of Russia's war in Ukraine. The conspiracy theory that domestic pro-democracy activism is funded by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to destabilize targeted countries circulates not only in Thailand but also in Cambodia, Hong Kong, and Vietnam.⁴⁰ To be sure, disinformation campaigns from Russia and China help propagate this rhetoric, consolidating autocratic sharp power.⁴¹ However, this angle alone is incomplete. The post-Cold War overreach of the liberal order has made civil society actors in the Global South—illiberal or not—increasingly wary of the United States and caused them to shift their geopolitical alignment to competing great powers.

CHAPTER 3

AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE EXTERNAL INFLUENCES THAT SHAPE IT

NIC CHEESEMAN

Africa has long been a theater in which external powers have competed for political influence and economic control, often to the detriment of both political stability and economic growth. International influence over the region has been contested for well over a century, from the Scramble for Africa, which divided the continent into competing colonial empires, to the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union provided arms and funding to allied governments as part of their efforts to stymie the spread of communism and capitalism, respectively.⁴²

Yet one area in which geopolitical competition has been less obvious is civil society. Formal civil society groups that engage on political issues in Africa have frequently been depicted—often unfairly—as agents of Western powers because of the proportion of their funding they receive from countries such as Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Indeed, this is one argument that leaders of more authoritarian African states have used to justify the introduction in recent years of legislation to constrain the activities and funding sources of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

There does not appear to have been a corresponding level of engagement from non-Western or nondemocratic powers in the last thirty years, however. At various points over the last seven decades, China and Russia have sought to increase their influence in African states, but they have tended to do this by working directly with governments rather than by seeking to exert influence indirectly through civil society groups.

One reason for the comparative lack of Chinese and Russian engagement in funding NGOs to date may be that domestically, Beijing and Moscow tend to see civil society groups as a threat and something to be contained and, hence, to have less established routes of pushing funding to civic organizations. Another reason may be that the main motivation of Chinese and Russian leaders has been not to promote a

particular form of authoritarianism abroad but to establish strong relations with governments willing to support their core economic and international ambitions.⁴³ Most notably, these ambitions imply a ready supply of natural resources and, in China's case, a willingness by governments to use their votes at the United Nations to protect Chinese interests on issues such as the recognition of Taiwan. Because this can be done with both democratic and authoritarian regimes, there is both less need and less appetite to try to foster a set of civil society groups to push for the adoption of a particular Chinese or Russian model of government.

The main ways in which China and Russia have sought to shape the civic arena have therefore been soft-power endeavors, such as influencing the media environment, promoting cultural associations and exchange visits, and providing training to officials, journalists, and students. This may be changing, however. Recent research on Chinese and Russian foreign policy has detected a stronger attachment to the promotion of a particular form of authoritarian rule.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, investigative journalists in South Africa have revealed a set of informal ties that appear to connect the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to several organizations in South Africa.⁴⁵

Against this background, there is a clear risk that if African governments impose greater constraints on civil society organizations (CSOs) that seek to promote democracy and human rights, or if there is a significant fall in Western funding for such causes, driven by other factors, there could be a sea change in the composition and balance of the nongovernmental sphere. That said, it is important not to exaggerate the impact of geopolitical factors on developments in Africa. When it comes to civil society and democracy, much like other policy areas, domestic factors mediate the impact of international interventions and have a greater impact on political outcomes.

DEMOCRATIZATION, WESTERN FUNDING, AND EXTRAVERTED POLITICS

Like societies in most parts of the world, African communities typically feature a myriad of social ties and informal institutions that bind individuals to one another. Where social groups, savings groups, community development projects, ethnic hometown associations, and religious organizations are concerned, it has often been argued that these ties are considerably denser in Africa than in more economically developed world regions.⁴⁶

The situation has historically been somewhat different where formal CSOs and social movements are concerned. On the one hand, high levels of poverty, along with a small middle class, made it difficult to sustain a strong and independent civic sector. On the other hand, the emergence of these kinds of groups was suppressed—first by colonial rule and second during the long periods of authoritarianism that followed African states' independence. During the 1970s and 1980s, the two main kinds of civil society group that continued to exist were trade union movements and religious organizations. These groups often operated in an uneasy peace with one-party states and military governments, frequently tolerating democratic abuses in return for being allowed to operate while seeking to temper the worst excesses of authoritarian regimes.⁴⁷

Things began to change rapidly after the collapse of authoritarian rule in the late 1980s. The decision of international financial institutions and many donors to channel a greater proportion of funds through nongovernmental actors to avoid the corruption assumed to be embedded in African states significantly increased the resources flowing through NGOs. Then, in the early 1990s, the combination of greater political space and a surge in funding from pro-democracy Western donors for organizations working on areas such as elections and human rights led to a dramatic rise in the number of civil society groups. Between 2012 and 2016, for example, donor members of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development delivered more than 40 percent of their bilateral aid to Nicaragua and Zimbabwe via nonstate channels.⁴⁸

Lacking employment opportunities and inspired by the fervor of Africa's second liberation, talented individuals joined and formed new groups that came to represent a combination of their own interests and motivations and the issues likely to secure funding.⁴⁹ In turn, the timing of the NGO explosion, the pro-democracy orientation of high-profile organizations, and the perception that most civic groups are predominantly funded from abroad have led to ongoing controversy about whether these groups are really African or, rather, represent external interests. One consequence of this suspicion is that leaders looking to silence critical civil society voices have often sought to delegitimize them by arguing that they are the agents of foreign powers and, hence, a threat to national sovereignty.⁵⁰

This claim is problematic, not least because it is clear that large majorities of African citizens favor democracy, but it tends to resonate with multiple audiences.⁵¹ There are two main reasons for this, in addition to the obvious financial support provided for nongovernmental actors by Western development agencies, such as the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office and the U.S. Agency for International Development. First, the notion that democracy is a European imposition not suited to African conditions continues to have proponents among academics, public intellectuals, and politicians, despite the evidence to the contrary.⁵²

Second, this argument often meets with a ready audience because it echoes a broader theme in popular discourse and academia that African states are "extraverted"—a term used to describe the way in which the continent's dependent position in the international system has been co-produced by external powers and domestic elites. According to political scientist Jean-François Bayart, for example, "the leading actors in sub-Saharan societies have tended [to] compensate for their difficulties in the autonomization of their power in intensifying the exploitation of their dependants by deliberate recourse to the strategies of extraversion, mobilizing resources derived from [a] (possibly unequal) relationship with the external."⁵³

Put another way, one of the most common arguments in academic writing and media commentary over the last three decades is that African leaders and governments survive by manipulating their control of the gate between their countries and the outside world, becoming dependent on capturing a cut of exports and aid funds to sustain themselves in power. In turn, the heavy emphasis on the external dependence of African states means that political leaders, researchers, and the general public are primed to expect external actors to have an oversize influence where civil society is concerned.

This depiction is, of course, an oversimplification: civil society is full of principled and motivated individuals, many of whom believe in democracy and human rights because of their own personal experiences. They can and do exert agency on a consistent basis, which is clear from the fact that international donors often do not receive exactly what they want from their engagement with NGOs and CSOs. Moreover, this assertiveness has strengthened since the decolonization and Black Lives Matter movements, which had the effect of refocusing attention on African solutions for African problems. African civil society groups, just like African leaders, have never simply been helpless pawns in an international game.

Yet perceptions that the actions of civil society groups reflect foreign agendas have contributed to these groups' political vulnerability, which, in turn, has been exacerbated by a range of other economic and political factors. These challenges include processes of economic informalization and high unemployment, which have weakened the position of trade unions, and the efforts of successive governments to co-opt and influence civil society groups. Taken together, this set of trends represents a significant challenge to the consolidation of an independent and sustainable civic sector.

AUTHORITARIAN SOFT POWER AND THE ANTI-NGO BACKLASH

Western donors typically see a vibrant civic sector as critical to democratic progress and consolidation—an argument backed by some academic research, which has found that CSO interventions have positive, though often modest, effects on the quality of democracy.⁵⁴ Despite this heavy emphasis on civil society, however, there is little evidence that authoritarian powers or non-Western partners have sought to advance their own interests by systematically seeking to fund or co-opt NGOs.

This picture fits with an academic literature that has been skeptical of the idea that countries such as China have engaged in an active program of autocracy promotion comparable to the democracy promotion activities of Western states in the 1990s. According to political scientist Oisín Tansey, for instance, while some examples of ideologically driven autocracy promotion could be identified during the Cold War, there is little evidence of this in the contemporary era.⁵⁵ Rather, countries such as China and Russia are generally seen to have been more pragmatic, focused on forming stable alliances with states willing to support their interests, whether those governments were democratic or authoritarian.

In line with this, academic research has generally concentrated on Russia's and China's efforts to expand their influence by engaging directly with African governments, affecting the media space, and shaping popular understanding of their countries through social media. China, for example, launched *China Daily Africa* in 2012 as part of a wider program aimed at fostering popular goodwill. The weekly publication is now available in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Tanzania, and disseminates pro-China news coverage and analysis. It is important not to exaggerate the impact of these efforts, however: *China Daily Africa's* Twitter feed had just over 4,000 followers as of September 2022.⁵⁶ Moreover, Russia has been slow to follow suit, with television news network RT only announcing that it would establish an Africa Hub in 2022.

These efforts to promote pro-China and pro-Russia attitudes have been buttressed by the broadcasting of dubbed or subtitled Chinese-language television shows, which have started to become popular in several African countries. To enable the dissemination of these cultural products, China has funded projects designed to provide access to digital television, for example through an initiative to connect 1,000 villages in Nigeria.⁵⁷ This outreach is part of a broader strategy to enhance the soft power of authoritarian states in Africa—that is, these states’ ability to persuade and co-opt. Examples of such efforts include:

- education programs through which African citizens can spend time in countries such as China, India, Russia, and Turkey and experience their cultures;
- training programs for government officials and journalists that often include explicit components designed to promote an understanding of foreign policy and international relations in line with the organizing government’s position;
- Chinese support for Confucius Institutes, writing associations, and student associations for those who have spent time studying in China;
- Russian support for women’s community groups and Russian cultural groups; and
- Turkish NGOs, organized through the Union of NGOs of the Islamic World, which “has acted as a catalyst in cultivating relations with Africa through its humanitarian aid,” according to sociologist Zeynep Atalay.⁵⁸

These programs are far from neutral, but they seem to be aimed more at winning over hearts and minds than at creating what political scientists Petr Kopecký and Cas Mudde have called a parallel “uncivil society” designed to promote a distinctive authoritarian vision of politics.⁵⁹ Research on Confucius Institutes in Africa, for example, has found that they are much more than simply centers for the promotion of Chinese language and culture. Instead, according to researcher Siyuan Li, they play “a deeper and more profound role in training local individuals, involving them in different forms of Chinese presence in Africa and linking their own personal development with the rise of China.” Such institutes are therefore an important part of efforts to promote “China’s soft power and national interest in Africa,” but one that is not designed to directly create high-profile civil society groups in China’s image.⁶⁰

It is important to keep in mind, however, that authoritarian funding for formal civil society groups would likely be covertly managed, so it may be that such programs exist but have yet to be identified and analyzed by researchers. Given this possibility, it is notable that investigative journalism in South Africa has suggested that the CCP may have been surreptitiously funding left-wing organizations and media to promote a pro-China narrative. According to journalists Micah Reddy and Sam Sole, U.S. tech mogul Neville Roy Singham is a key node in a “global network of media, think-tanks, unions and political parties” designed to further China’s influence abroad. Although exact relationships and funding streams are hard to pin down, “circumstantial evidence suggests that the Singham network became an increasingly coherent political project intertwined with the propaganda and disinformation machinery of certain state actors, most importantly the Chinese Communist Party.”⁶¹

In the South African context, the organizations that are said to have formed the core of this network include the *New Frame* magazine; the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, the country's biggest union; and its political offshoot, the Socialist Revolutionary Workers' Party. These bodies, it is argued, were encouraged to promote a pro-China line, most notably by defending and supporting Beijing's presence in Africa against various lines of criticism.

In the future, such revelations may become more common, especially as there is growing evidence that China is adopting a more focused and ideologically driven foreign policy in Africa. Researcher Daniel Munday, for example, has argued that "since the ascendancy of Xi Jinping as President of China in 2012, the Chinese state has promoted these constituent elements of authoritarianism due to ideological concerns, a process which has not been captured by much of the autocracy promotion literature due to the recency of this phenomenon."⁶² If this interpretation is correct, the next ten years could see much greater levels of direct Chinese support and funding for left-leaning groups and trade unions across the continent. This would represent a new era of more overt geopolitical competition for the heart and soul of African civil society.

Anti-NGO Legislation and Control of Information

Perhaps the most significant impact of countries such as China and Russia on civic space at present has come indirectly through the examples they have set with regard to anti-NGO legislation and the support they have provided to African governments that seek to exert greater control over civic space. Russia's 2012 foreign agent law, for example, requires organizations that receive funding from outside the country to register as foreign agents and include a disclaimer to that effect on all publications. The introduction of the legislation was widely interpreted as an attempt to curb the activities and criticism of independent NGOs after protests against Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012.⁶³

In subsequent years, several other countries around the world followed suit: between 2012 and 2015, over 120 laws restricting the operation of CSOs were proposed or implemented.⁶⁴ Similar processes have occurred in other areas. A 2022 report by the International Republican Institute on China's influence on the information space in Ethiopia, Ghana, and Nigeria revealed a "disquieting" picture. According to the report's authors, "in Nigeria, the president's office has openly sought the aid of [China's] primary internet-censorship organ, seeking advice on how to 'manage' the country's unruly online discourse." There is a similar situation in Ethiopia, where "the CCP has invested significant time and energy in training the ruling party on the methods that it uses to manage [Chinese] society, rewarding and reinforcing the authoritarian habits of the country's single ruling party."⁶⁵

Moreover, according to the report's authors, this problem is not limited to the continent's more authoritarian states: "Even in a robust democracy like Ghana, [China] has gained significant footholds in its ability to influence both public discourse and the normal functioning of a sovereign democratic government, in ways that appear to undermine the government's commitment to transparency and accountability before its citizenry."⁶⁶

In these ways, the efforts of China and Russia to form politically and economically productive relationships with African states—and strengthen their allies’ hold on power—have emboldened several African governments to exert greater government control over NGOs and social media. It is important to note, however, that the problematic impact of external governments on African civil society is not limited to non-Western states such as China and Russia. The space available to NGOs first began to close in earnest in the 2000s, after the U.S. government encouraged its African counterparts to introduce antiterrorism legislation in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The vague wording of much of this legislation enabled governments to manipulate security concerns to place NGOs under greater scrutiny. In other words, when it comes to geopolitical competition, the actions of both Western and non-Western states have, at times, had negative implications for the resilience of civil society in Africa.

FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND PROXY RELIGIOUS WARS

There is one specific area in which there has been more direct competition between rival international networks. This is the support given to competing religious groups for the express purpose of winning a greater share of the increasingly crowded spiritual marketplace. In some cases, this geopolitical competition has been driven by states; in others, it has been led by nonstate religious networks and communities. For example, in recent decades, right-wing constituencies in the United States and beyond have promoted a hardline form of evangelical Christianity across borders. Meanwhile, the Russian government has funded the expansion of the Russian Orthodox Church in countries such as the Central African Republic.

The same period also saw the promotion of the Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam from Saudi Arabia, and of Shia Islam from Iran, in a context in which most African Muslims have traditionally followed more moderate Sufi practices. The pivot of countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia to invest in hundreds of Islamic educational institutions across the continent has set the scene for what researcher Joshua Meservey has called the “contest for the future of African Islam.”⁶⁷

Although these religious networks typically avoid couching their aims in explicitly political terms—and African religious trends also shape religious developments elsewhere in the world—there is evidence that their expansion has had serious consequences on the prospects for liberal democracy and human rights.⁶⁸ Most notably, this expansion has fostered more hardline and exclusionary versions of religious doctrines, which threatens to undermine believers’ tolerance of other religions, homosexuality, and women’s rights. While many African societies already held negative attitudes toward homosexuality and, in some cases, certain women’s rights, such as abortion, there is evidence that external religious movements have played an important role in encouraging religious and political groups to adopt a more hardline position.⁶⁹ In turn, this has incentivized opportunistic leaders in countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda to propose homophobic legislation or oppose constitutional provisions that protect women’s rights. Although such campaigns often fail, they do so only after causing considerable trauma and hardship for the communities concerned.

CONCLUSION

Formal CSOs in Africa have engaged in a wide range of activities to promote democracy and human rights in partnership with international funders. But this engagement has left them vulnerable to accusations they are the agents of Western powers and, hence, to anti-NGO legislation that seeks to regulate their activity and limit the funds they can secure internationally. This situation has created something of a crisis for African civil society—at least for the types of civic groups that have traditionally worked on democracy and human rights. The challenge is particularly difficult to resolve because overt Western support for civil society groups—and a significant injection of funding, for example as part of an attempt to revive democracy around the world in the wake of the war in Ukraine—could easily backfire and inspire further repression.

In the context of rising geopolitical competition, this conundrum raises the question of whether restrictions on Western funding, and possible Western de-engagement due to the economic challenges currently faced by many European and North American states, could create a vacuum that would come to be filled by authoritarian powers. To date, there is relatively little evidence that countries such as China and Russia are actively seeking to fund uncivil society groups to agitate for authoritarian political systems in their own image. More common so far have been efforts by these governments to build soft power via the media and cultural organizations and mute overt criticism of their actions in the international sphere by developing informal ties to existing groups.

There are two important caveats to this conclusion, however. The first is that authoritarian regimes, by their nature, are secretive and tend not to publicize their links to organizations abroad—especially when these links are likely to be controversial. The informal channels of Chinese funding and influence exposed in South Africa are testament to this. Similarly, CSOs are well aware of the risks of being depicted as the agents of outside powers and so often face incentives to downplay the extent to which their funding and agendas are supplied from outside the continent. To this extent, the discussion of geopolitical competition may underplay the extent of foreign involvement—and evidence may emerge over the next few years that suggests deeper and more profound ties than those described above.

The second caveat is that the global struggle over Islam and Christianity is having an indirect, though no less profound, impact on attitudes toward human rights, while the foreign policies of Western and non-Western states are constantly shifting. There is evidence that under Xi, China has started to move toward a more aggressive approach to promoting authoritarian models, and Russian foreign policy also appears to be moving in this direction. Given these changes, observers may well record more overt geopolitical competition in the next decade than in the last.

CHAPTER 4

THE LIMITS OF CIVIL SOCIETY GEOPOLITICS IN TURKEY

ÖZGE ZIHNIOĞLU

Turkey's geography at the junction of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East puts the country at the fault line of various geopolitical tensions: to the south, the Syrian war, nuclear negotiations in Iran, and the ongoing turmoil in Libya; to the north, Russia's invasion of Ukraine; and to the east, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. These neighboring geopolitical tensions now involve actors beyond the traditional domain of foreign and security policy, with civil society increasingly caught up in broader political trends.

In Turkey, two forms of civil society geopolitics can be observed. First, the government is using civil society for its own geopolitical and economic ends. Ankara mobilizes its own civic organizations while pairing with like-minded interest groups, charities, and humanitarian organizations to expand its influence. Second, various civil society actors are repositioning themselves according to the shifting geopolitical landscape. Organizations that focus on humanitarian issues and refugees stretch to respond to existing and new needs. The complex factor in Turkey's civil society geopolitics is the way in which these developments relate to domestic politics, which continue to influence Turkish civic activism.

WORKING ALONGSIDE THE GOVERNMENT IN AFRICA AND BEYOND

Civil society has become an important feature of the Turkish government's efforts to advance its geopolitical and economic goals in Turkey's neighborhood and beyond. An illustrative example of this trend is Africa. With its rich natural resources and free markets, Africa—Libya and East African countries in particular—has become a battleground for geopolitical rivalry.

As Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan asserted in 2018, “partnership with the [African] continent is strategic for Turkey.”⁷⁰ The country has had a place in this geopolitical struggle for some time, with an ambitious agenda. Over the past two decades, Erdoğan visited twenty-eight African countries, increased the number of Turkish embassies from twelve to forty-two, and enabled the operation of flights by the partly state-owned company Turkish Airlines to sixty destinations on the continent. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) has expanded its presence through its twenty-three offices and funded various development projects in Africa.⁷¹

Government Collaboration With Civil Society

Civil society has come to the fore to complement these governmental efforts. In this context, there are at least two ways in which the Turkish government employs nongovernmental actors. First, in various countries, government agencies and civil society act together. This collaboration occurs, for example, with business organizations and interest groups. Ankara has a growing presence in Africa with government-friendly business groups, such as the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey (DEİK) and the Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (MÜSİAD). DEİK establishes partnerships through bilateral business councils with local counterpart organizations to strengthen trade and economic ties. Some firms affiliated with DEİK also provide aid to the African countries in which they operate.

DEİK, together with the Turkish Ministry of Trade, also organizes the Turkey-Africa Economic and Business Forum. Held three times since 2016, the forum serves as a platform to bring together public- and private-sector actors from Turkey and across Africa to enhance cooperation and develop new partnerships.⁷² MÜSİAD concurred with Erdoğan on Africa's importance to Turkey because of the continent's economy, population, and strategic location. The association declared 2018 the Year of Africa and opened several new branches to strengthen economic ties with the continent.⁷³ These organizations and some of their members also accompany the president on his visits to Africa.

Humanitarian organizations and charities comprise another group of civic actors that complement the government's efforts to advance its geopolitical goals. Islamic organizations, in particular, have been active in the Muslim world and in the Global South more broadly over the past two decades. Most commonly, these organizations mobilize humanitarian aid. In addition, they provide relief aid in response to natural disasters. Some also carry out cultural and educational activities. Larger organizations, such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), additionally provide development aid and build schools, orphanages, hospitals, and health centers.

While these organizations may be carrying out their own projects, they work in close coordination with government agencies. For example, the Red Crescent and the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency provide immediate relief and work with TİKA to supply development aid. At the same time, there are limited civil society linkages, as some Turkish civil society organizations work with civic groups in other countries. The government also makes sporadic connections with these local civic actors. For instance, the first lady meets local civic organizations that work mainly on women's and children's issues during the president's Africa visits.⁷⁴ However, these are one-off meetings.

Government-Led Civic Actors

The second way in which Ankara employs nongovernmental actors is by relying increasingly on its own civic actors—government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs)—to expand its geopolitical influence. For instance, in June 2016, the government established the Turkish Maarif Foundation to conduct educational activities and provide opportunities such as scholarships and accommodation in Turkey and abroad.⁷⁵ After the failed coup attempt in July 2016, the foundation started taking over Gülenist educational institutions across the world, which had been established at primary, secondary, and high-school levels and had become a central way to extend the Gülen movement's influence abroad. As of April 2022, the foundation provided education in nearly 430 institutions in forty-nine countries.⁷⁶

Another organization, the Turkish Religious Foundation, was established in 1975 to provide aid and conducts educational, social, and charitable activities to support religious services in Turkey and abroad. The foundation has distributed aid and food parcels during the month of Ramadan. More recently, the foundation has been making plans to expand its activities in Libya, where it has started laying the groundwork for opening a branch in Tripoli and has been working with the Turkish authorities to renovate schools and mosques.⁷⁷ The government also spearheaded the establishment of the Yunus Emre Foundation and its affiliated institutes in 2007, mainly to run Turkish-language courses and organize cultural activities. These institutes have expanded their operations with over sixty cultural centers abroad.⁷⁸

Turkey's openings in Africa have yielded important geopolitical and economic gains. For instance, in 2019, Ankara signed a maritime deal with Libya to establish an exclusive economic zone in the Mediterranean. The deal strengthened Turkey's claim in the Eastern Mediterranean in view of the developing energy crisis. In Somalia, Turkey not only has a military base but was also invited to carry out oil exploration at sea. At the same time, African countries are increasingly interested in Turkish unmanned combat aerial vehicles, with Ethiopia, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia having already purchased these.

In its use of civil society actors, Turkey pursues more diffuse forms of influence through business relations and educational, cultural, and humanitarian efforts. In that sense, civic organizations may not have a direct impact in this geopolitical struggle. That said, their work has been important in gaining societal trust. Local aid and development projects have been important in particular in Libya and Somalia, where state building is a major objective.

CIVIL SOCIETY'S POSITIONING IN RECENT GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS

Russia's assault on Ukraine that began in late February 2022 produced divergent reactions in the Turkish civic sphere. Immediately after the invasion, various civic groups, in particular human rights organizations, condemned Russia.⁷⁹ Some organizations swiftly made statements denouncing Russia and drawing attention to potential human rights atrocities of the war.⁸⁰ Others used social media to share news from Russia and Ukraine. Amnesty International Turkey verified human rights abuses and ran a petition campaign calling for an end to the attacks.⁸¹ These reactions soon spread to a large sector of civil

society. Business groups, humanitarian organizations, professional organizations, and trade unions also made statements denouncing Russia's attack on Ukraine. They urged both countries to cease the ongoing conflict and called on international actors to help reinstate peace.⁸²

Meanwhile, neo-Eurasianists—those who believe Turkey's interests lie in developing closer links with Eurasian countries, including Russia—have a very different perspective of the war. They see the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as common threats to both Turkey and Russia. Neo-Eurasianists argue both that the United States has been encircling Russia through NATO's eastern enlargement and now by arming Ukraine and that the alliance cannot protect Turkey. As such, they urge Turkey to review its place in NATO. Kemalist civil society groups, such as the Atatürkist Thought Association, have also been critical of the United States and NATO, underlining what they perceive as the West's provocation of Russia. Unlike the neo-Eurasianists, though, the Kemalists advocate a policy of active neutrality.

The Russian invasion has led to a major humanitarian crisis in the region as millions of Ukrainians have fled their homes in search of peace and safety. While most of these refugees have been absorbed by Ukraine's neighbors to the west and southwest, a fraction of them—20,000 as of early March 2022—have gone to Turkey.⁸³ Humanitarian groups, refugee organizations, and charities responded swiftly to Ukrainian refugees going not only to Turkey but also to other countries, such as Moldova, where national capacities were strained. These organizations have been among the most active since the onset of the war, providing immediate humanitarian relief to alleviate the scale of the suffering. At the same time, the Russian invasion caused tens of thousands of Russians—including activists, journalists, artists, and ordinary citizens who oppose the war or are worried about conscription—to flee to Turkey.⁸⁴ These people may not necessarily need humanitarian support when they arrive. However, Turkish civic activists have not yet mobilized in solidarity with this growing Russian exile community, either.

DOMESTIC DRIVERS OF GEOPOLITICIZED CIVIL SOCIETY

Civic groups' positioning vis-à-vis the geopolitical competition in the region is not independent of Turkey's domestic politics and developments. For instance, conservative and nationalist groups that initially condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine soon started calling for strategic neutrality. They argued that the war should not damage Turkey's trade and economic relations with Russia. This stance mirrors the Turkish government's position and discourse on the war, as Ankara seeks a delicate balance between Moscow and Kyiv.

The reflection of the government's foreign policy in conservative and nationalist groups' reactions to international issues, in particular, is also visible elsewhere. One very good example of this is China's human rights abuses against Uighur Muslims. Various Islamic humanitarian groups and nationalist organizations have raised this issue on social media and led solidarity campaigns with the Uighur people. Several Islamic women's organizations held a march on International Women's Day on March 8, 2022,

to draw attention to the plight of the Uighurs.⁸⁵ However, in comparison with the strong civic responses of the late 2000s, reactions in recent years have been sporadic, unsystematic, and more muted. This trend reflects the change in the Turkish government's position: Erdoğan, who called the Chinese repression of the Uighurs a "genocide" in 2009, has gradually scaled down the language and tone of his criticisms as Turkey has grown more economically dependent on China.⁸⁶

Business organizations also reflect the government's balanced reactions to the Russia-Ukraine war. However, what shapes these reactions are the economic implications of the war in view of Turkey's deteriorating economy in recent years and the country's strong economic ties with both Russia and Ukraine. For instance, in calling for an end to the war, MÜSIAD, which represents conservative Anatolian businesses, has highlighted Turkey's \$40 billion foreign trade volume with the two countries and Turkey's role in the Russian and Ukrainian construction industries.⁸⁷ In a similar way, the pro-Western Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSIAD) stresses Turkey's use of diplomacy and mediation efforts in pointing to the war's economic and financial consequences for Turkey, such as on foreign trade, tourism, and the rise in international prices.⁸⁸

In recent years, some of the Turkish government's geopolitical actions have been controversial to those with conservative and nationalist sensitivities. Still, conservative and nationalist civil society groups have been careful not to directly challenge the government. For instance, during solidarity campaigns with the Uighur people, Turkish civil society organizations limited their criticisms to China. When Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Turkey in 2021, Beijing alone was the target of the protests. The demonstrating civic organizations fell short of urging the Turkish government to respond to China or criticizing Ankara's inaction.⁸⁹

Turkey's conservative and nationalist civil society organizations are reluctant to criticize the government's international geopolitical behavior even when it contradicts their positions on key issues. This is revealed most clearly in these organizations' reactions to Ankara's normalization efforts with Israel. Before and during Israeli President Isaac Herzog's visit to Turkey in March 2022, various civil society groups, in particular Islamic organizations, reacted by holding small-scale protests and press conferences in cities across the country.⁹⁰ Broadly speaking, these efforts focused on Israel's treatment of Palestinians. Ahead of Herzog's visit, some civil society organizations called on the government to cancel the visit and change course. They also noted that they found it hard to understand the political rapprochement between Turkey and Israel. However, they did not go further and criticize the government or Erdoğan.

The reactions of Turkish civil society to the Russian invasion of Ukraine have remained sporadic and limited mainly because human rights organizations are caught up in a whirlwind of issues that require their attention. Groups have their hands full with individual and collective human rights abuses as well as violations of the freedoms of association and assembly in Turkey. Larger organizations, such as Amnesty International, are also busy trying to draw people's attention to other human rights abuses, from Myanmar to Syria, which inevitably limits their focus on the Russian war.

Likewise, humanitarian and refugee organizations were already tied up with the nearly 4 million refugees, mainly from Syria, in Turkey before the Russian invasion.⁹¹ These groups are unlikely to be able to absorb many new refugees from the north—either Russians or Ukrainians—as international aid and international nongovernmental organizations continue to withdraw from Turkey. Therefore, these groups, while sending relief aid to Ukrainian refugees in neighboring countries, also use the current situation as an opportunity to draw attention to Syrian refugees at home.

CONCLUSION

Geopolitical rivalry in the region has a varying impact on Turkish civil society. On the one hand, the government employs civil society actors to advance its strategic goals. It establishes its own civic groups and uses government-friendly actors to build up its presence in several countries. These civic organizations work in coordination with government agencies and have a growing presence in the surrounding region. In its use of civil society actors, the Turkish government seeks influence mainly through business relations and educational, cultural, and humanitarian efforts. In that sense, Ankara's use of civil society is indirectly geopolitical. Some Turkish civic organizations also work with local civic groups in other countries. Although these civil society links are rather operational and their relation to geopolitical dynamics diffuse, Turkey's geopolitical action in the region has yielded results. While civil society geopolitics has been indirect and not far-reaching, it has nonetheless been important in gaining societal trust.

On the other hand, various civic groups and organizations have taken a stance in neighboring geopolitical tensions, most recently after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. That said, it is too early to conclude that civil society is repositioning itself in the face of geopolitical struggles. Turkish domestic politics and developments continue to affect civil society's views and criticisms of the government's international actions. In instances where conservative and nationalist civic groups found that Ankara's international activity clashed with their agendas, such as in the rapprochement with Israel, they toned down their criticism of the government rather than shift their agendas. In short, geopolitical competition in Turkey plays out in the country's civic sphere and does so through the prism of domestic politics.

CHAPTER 5

MIDDLE EASTERN CIVIL SOCIETY'S STRUGGLES WITH THE PRIMACY OF GEOPOLITICS

KRISTINA KAUSCH

A region in which many global powers' core interests converge, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been an epicenter of global and regional power struggles. Over the past decade, the accumulated impacts of Russia's return to the region, China's Belt and Road Initiative, the prospect of U.S. retrenchment, and intensified regional competition after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings have led to a sharp increase in the scope and speed of these dynamics, forming a complex web of competitive multipolarity.⁹² The wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen; Israel's repositioning via the 2020 Abraham Accords, which normalized Tel Aviv's relations with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE); continued tensions with Iran over nuclear proliferation and regional expansionism; and Turkey's and the Gulf states' geopolitical forays into the Levant and Africa are but a few of the elements stirring controversy.

MENA civil society has been caught up in these developments as geopolitics heightens state-driven power politics. Online activism has become the front line of a new digital geopolitics; external powers have sought to leverage civil society to their geopolitical advantage; and right-oriented civil society actors are having to push back against new kinds of geopolitical interventions.

STATES USING CIVIL SOCIETY FOR GEOPOLITICAL ENDS

The MENA region has harbored some of the most notable examples of governments employing nonstate actors to advance their geopolitical objectives. Most markedly, since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, regional powers' use of proxy fighters has become deeply entrenched in Middle Eastern conflicts. Through long-standing alliances between states and armed nonstate proxies, such as Iran and Hezbollah, or ad hoc partnerships, such as Russia's alliance with Kurdish fighters in Syria, armed nonstate actors have become decisive players in shaping the geopolitical struggles among major states.

The geopolitical influence of nonsecurity civic actors is harder to pin down. Religious institutions bear a regional influence and soft power that governments have used for transnational geopolitical purposes. The multilayered connection between the Muslim Brotherhood and its state sponsors in Qatar and Turkey stands out as a notable instance of a state-nonstate alliance with geopolitical dividends for both sides. From its Egyptian mother ship, the Muslim Brotherhood forged its messaging and used its international network and privileged state connections in geopolitical ways long before the Arab Spring and the return of great-power politics gave faith-based diplomacy a further boost.

MENA governments have gained leverage by rebranding themselves as champions of climate adaptation, promoters of regional stability, migration gatekeepers, or civil war power brokers. They have used civil society organizations (CSOs) as vehicles for these rebranding efforts. Despite MENA countries being disproportionately affected by climate change, there is a breadth of examples that show how MENA governments have used climate action and energy transitions, as well as CSOs active in these fields, to improve their international image and standing. Morocco has used climate policy to advance its claims on Western Sahara and migration to push for a Spanish policy U-turn toward backing Morocco's proposal for the future of the territory. International human rights watchdogs have deplored the way in which the Egyptian government has been employing the November 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Sharm el Sheikh as a rebranding exercise to deflect attention from Egypt's internal human rights crisis.⁹³

Of all the geopolitical developments in recent years, the transnational spread of digital authoritarianism is likely the one with the most far-reaching consequences for MENA civil society. Digital authoritarianism is relevant to civil society geopolitics because it uses nonstate actors for strategic, power politics aims across borders. Regimes have adapted to digital activism in a variety of forms. Online surveillance by means of big data analysis, spyware, and tracking apps; the creation of false narratives via inauthentic online activity and influence operations; and censorship are among the most notable ways in which regimes have been turning digital technologies from a threat into an opportunity for authoritarian rule. Monitoring critical voices' activity through digital surveillance and controlling narratives through online disinformation, delegitimization, and censorship are two complementary, increasingly transnational elements in this approach.

The trend toward digital surveillance received a boost during the coronavirus pandemic, as it sanctioned and promoted the widespread use of individual tracking apps, while citizens volunteered sensitive personal data on a massive scale. The introduction of biometrics helped the spread of facial-recognition technologies powered by artificial intelligence (AI), enabling both mass and targeted surveillance. The model of the Chinese surveillance state has been the blueprint for MENA governments, especially in the Gulf states, whose financial means and tech base have enabled the systematic purchase and implementation of Chinese surveillance technology over the past few years. The normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE through the Abraham Accords has further accelerated the spread of Israeli surveillance tech in the Gulf. Prominent targets of the Pegasus spyware, produced by the Israeli tech firm NSO Group, in MENA, Europe, and beyond illustrate one way in which targeted surveillance technologies have turned into a transnational threat.

While digital surveillance has enabled MENA governments to monitor and control civic actors' identities and movements, disinformation campaigns on digital channels have helped polarize public opinion and disperse narratives critical of a government before they can swell and turn into broader movements and public unrest. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular, have systematically sought to dominate the Arabic-language public media space via infiltration, disinformation, propaganda, and censorship, amounting to what political scientist Marc Owen Jones has called "the Gulf's post-truth moment."⁹⁴ The case of a Twitter headquarters employee reportedly groomed as a Saudi mole illustrates the importance the kingdom bestows on steering online narratives.⁹⁵

State-sanctioned troll armies have increasingly become a central tool to manipulate and direct narratives on social media. Troll farms around Riyadh have been accused of the systematic online harassment of Saudi dissidents; the trolling by Saudi bot armies of murdered dissident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi has merely been one high-profile example of a broader pattern.⁹⁶ Nor is this technique limited to autocracies: amid rising unrest in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the Israeli government reportedly asked social media companies to remove more than 1,010 pieces of content and promote so-called grassroots activities by recruiting citizens to mass report content on social media.⁹⁷ And it has been reported that the UAE is systematically growing its own digital surveillance technology by recruiting high-profile digital mercenaries, such as former U.S. National Security Agency hackers, former Israeli intelligence officers, and former NSO Group employees to spy on critical voices, including civil society activists.⁹⁸

Iran, too, has been very active in disinformation, including by targeting civil society. Endless Mayfly, an Iran-aligned network of inauthentic websites and online personae, is reported to have spread false and divisive information on Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States by targeting journalists, analysts, and other influential nonstate voices. Notably, many of the inauthentic online personae created to push these negative narratives about Iran's adversaries were labeled civil society or human rights activists or journalists.⁹⁹

By a similar token, Saudi and Emirati troll farms have been infamous in creating alternative narratives of regional and global geopolitical crises, including by reinforcing Russian propaganda on the war in Ukraine. As these governments seek to dominate narratives on social media, critical voices leave this space; the void is filled by what Jones has called "a pseudo-civil society of trolls and bots" that deliberately create an alternative reality on social media in line with the preferred narratives of Saudi and Emirati leaders.¹⁰⁰ A digital quasi-civic sphere has become a leading edge of geopolitical rivalry and been instrumentalized to strategic ends.

CHINESE AND RUSSIAN SOFT-POWER EFFORTS

External powers China and Russia have increasingly used civil society to enhance their soft power and support their geopolitical narratives in the MENA region, in the digital space as well as on the ground. Far from the narrow economic focus it is often ascribed, China has been investing heavily in schools and Chinese-language teaching in the Gulf, especially in the UAE, China's central strategic partner in

the region and home to the largest Chinese community in the Middle East. Beijing has also expanded its network of cultural diplomacy: as of 2020, twenty-three Confucius Institutes had been opened across MENA, including in the conservative Gulf.¹⁰¹

Further, Chinese nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including government-organized ones, have been actively flanking Beijing's online disinformation efforts to spread negative narratives about the U.S. role in the Middle East. In August 2022, in the wake of a U.S.-backed United Nations (UN) report about human rights violations against Uighur Muslims in China's Xinjiang region, the China Society for Human Rights Studies issued a report that accused Washington of triggering a "clash of civilizations" in the Middle East. The report depicted the United States as a "war empire" that leaves behind a trail of devastation and sorrow marked by military interventions and double-faced human rights violations.¹⁰²

China's consistently pro-Palestinian positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict further help Beijing's regional positioning by generating sympathy among Arab publics and allowing China to distinguish itself from the United States. Like Moscow, Beijing has deployed substantial coronavirus vaccine diplomacy in MENA, with several states in the region relying heavily on the Chinese Sinopharm and Russian Sputnik V vaccines in the early stages of the pandemic. And Beijing has sought to play the Muslim card to gather MENA countries' sympathies for its repressive policies against the Uighurs in Xinjiang. Accompanied by favorable coverage in Arabic-language Chinese media, the Chinese Islamic Association, the institution that supervises Islam in China, has "[crafted] the Xinjiang narrative for an Arabic-speaking audience: defending the uniqueness of Chinese Islam . . . engaging in 'Hajj diplomacy'; and conducting exchanges with Muslim leaders and Islamic institutions," according to researchers at the Middle East Institute.¹⁰³

Overall, Chinese soft-power efforts appear to be paying off: unlike in most regions of the world, where views of China have deteriorated in recent years, polls continue to show comparatively positive attitudes toward China across MENA. Roughly half to two-thirds of citizens in the region favor stronger economic relations with Beijing—with the exceptions of Algeria and Egypt, where only 36 and 30 percent, respectively, are in favor. Although MENA citizens remain skeptical toward all outside actors, the Arab Barometer research network consistently depicts China as the most popular global player in the region, far ahead of the United States and Russia.¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, more critical views of China are blossoming, including among CSOs. As the linkages between Chinese and Middle Eastern abuses of digital surveillance technology for the purposes of human rights violations become increasingly apparent, China is starting to be seen as an enabler or inspirer of MENA authoritarianism.¹⁰⁵ China's Uighur policy may also begin to stain the country's reputation: as MENA governments such as those of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, which in a 2019 open letter publicly endorsed Beijing's policy in Xinjiang, become increasingly complicit with China in extraditing Uighur citizens, so Egyptian rights groups have documented detentions and deportations.¹⁰⁶ So far, however, such critical tendencies have yet to meaningfully influence China's approval rates in MENA.

Russia's hard-security engagement in the MENA region has been flanked by a series of soft-power measures in religious and cultural diplomacy and disinformation that have received less attention. These include religious diplomacy through the Russian Orthodox Church and use of the Muslim majority in the Russian region of Chechnya to portray the Kremlin as a friend of Islam; the opening of schools and cultural institutes; and, most notably, a systematic Arabic-language propaganda effort through Russian mainstream and online media.¹⁰⁷ In their online disinformation operations, Russian bots have frequently posed as activists or journalists to legitimize the activity of inauthentic online personae that push pro-Russian narratives.

In the light of systematic Russian disinformation and propaganda, both the importance of social media as a news source in MENA and the heavy influence of Arabic-language Russian media across the region may help at least partly explain why Russia has not experienced the kind of lasting damage to its image that the United States did after its 2003 intervention in Iraq. Although the 2015–2018 Russian air campaign in Syria was accompanied by public mobilization against the war, this has not led to a significant backlash against Russian influence in MENA. Similarly, in the wake of Russia's current war in Ukraine, the Russian disinformation tools RT Arabic and Sputnik have successfully propagated Russian war narratives across the region.¹⁰⁸

CIVIL SOCIETY'S RESPONSE AND POSITIONING

While governments in the MENA region have sought to boost their digital capacities for authoritarian ends, civil society's response to this trend has been notable. Transnational civic advocacy reflects an awareness of the threat of digital authoritarianism and shows an increasing focus on upholding digital rights and countering disinformation across the region. As activists are targeted, counterinitiatives have mushroomed to combat trolling and defeat inauthentic online narratives. Just before his untimely death in 2018, Khashoggi reportedly supported the creation of a civic volunteer army called Electronic Bees to combat Twitter trolls, and the organization was later established by another Saudi dissident.¹⁰⁹ Organizations such as the Tor Project have been instrumental in providing secure software and training human rights defenders, journalists, and activists in digital security.

Digital authoritarianism has not been the easy victory for regimes it may often appear, because it simultaneously restricts online activism and encourages civic activists to innovate with new methods to circumvent attempts at virtual repression. The use of virtual private networks (VPNs), encrypted communication, and peer-to-peer networking allows activists to bypass state censorship. At the same time, the availability of primary sources online and the boost in international networking among civic actors have given birth to entirely new methodologies, such as crowdsourced open-source intelligence. Such intelligence is generated, cross-referenced, and verified using publicly available information and helped to first uncover the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians. The methodology's success led to its adoption by many human rights NGOs and even UN bodies to document human rights violations and rebut state disinformation. In another example of civic actors' digital empowerment, the Ceasefire platform allows for real-time identification and online reporting of human rights violations using AI and machine-learning techniques.¹¹⁰

Despite the encouraging tone of these examples, the power imbalance between states and civil society is only likely to grow, because countermeasures against digital activism require a certain level of technical expertise and networking. For example, although MENA CSOs increasingly divert their activities away from state-monitored social networks and create their own websites to disseminate content, these sites have widespread and significant cybersecurity deficiencies, making them vulnerable to state interference. Such deficiencies are likely to be even more pronounced among the small-scale CSOs outside national capitals that lack necessary skills and outreach. For all their adaptability and courage, civic actors are increasingly at risk of finding themselves at the mercy of states' apparatus of digital repression.

Beyond pushing back against new constraints, civil society has also vocally defended its own geopolitical positions, most notably in relation to the wars and crises in Libya, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen; the normalization of relations with Israel; and foreign states' influence in the domestic affairs of MENA countries. While state objections to the foreign funding of civil society have a long history in the region, a more recent trend is that such concerns have begun to emanate from civil society itself. Political parties and their connections with foreign powers have been subjected to much scrutiny and controversy since the Arab Spring as nascent democracies have feared undue influence by foreign powers in shaping a new domestic order. High-profile prosecution cases, notably the 2018 trial of Egyptian CSOs accused of receiving illegal funding from abroad, have illustrated these dynamics.

The post-2011 proxy wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen also led to growing unease about foreign military presence and increased awareness of proxy relationships. While authoritarian governments' pushback against U.S. and European Union (EU) support for pro-democracy CSOs became more ferocious after the Arab Spring, the rejection of Gulf and Turkish funding for Islamist organizations triggered resistance from liberal segments of society, which feared an advantage for Islamists in political contestation.

In recent years, the controversy about foreign funding has come to encompass Gulf states' financing of MENA governments and the influence they yield, in particular in the context of some Arab states' normalization of relations with Israel. In Jordan, where Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are among the biggest state donors, authorities have used blurry legislation to arrest and penalize several high-profile individuals for criticizing the Gulf states and their normalization of relations with Israel, making Jordanians wary of publicly condemning the Gulf states and their regional role.¹¹¹ Normalization with Israel is among the issues on which government policy and public opinion clash most notably: polls consistently show that overwhelming majorities in Arab countries, including those concerned, reject normalization.¹¹²

This stance has been reflected in the reactions of CSOs, which have spoken out against the move toward rapprochement. In Bahrain, a group of twenty-three organizations—including leftists, liberals, nationalists, trade unions, and professional associations—issued a joint statement rejecting normalization with Israel. In Kuwait, a joint declaration by twenty-nine political parties and CSOs and another by thirty-seven parliamentarians warned strongly against the country eyeing normalization. The grand mufti of Oman issued a statement reminding Muslims that the liberation of the Al-Aqsa Mosque remained a sacred duty.¹¹³

Meanwhile, in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar, chapters of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, which seeks to put economic pressure on Israel, formed a united group called Gulfies Against Normalization. Emirati civil society also issued collective statements urging the government of the UAE to reconsider. Although Saudi civil society kept a low profile in terms of its statements, the hashtag #SaudisAgainstNormalization soared to Twitter's top three after the Abraham Accords were signed in 2020.¹¹⁴ Concerned about normalization sidelining the rights of vulnerable communities, in particular Palestinians, Saharawis, and Yemenis, civil society coalitions continue to campaign against the rapprochement process more broadly.

THE LIMITS OF CIVIL SOCIETY'S GEOPOLITICAL IMPACT

For a fuller picture of civil society actors' ability to play an active role in geopolitical themes, these movements must be seen in the wider regional context. Unlike armed groups and other transnational security actors, CSOs in MENA often lack the geopolitical assets and leverage to directly influence the actions and relationships of major regional and global players. CSOs' ability to lobby influential state actors, sway public opinion, or mobilize crowds is partly conditioned by the geopolitical profile of their host government, which influences the support civic organizations can expect from abroad.

With the heightening of interstate contestation, several geopolitical concerns have gained prominence, providing openings for MENA governments to raise their geopolitical profiles. Themes such as climate change and energy transitions; the emerging security alliance between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE; the restoration of nuclear deterrence via the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran; and, most recently, Russia's war in Ukraine and the global split it caused have risen to the top of global players' priorities. While these developments have opened the door to some geopolitical roles for civil society, CSOs that deal specifically with human rights have been put on the defensive as the international community has foregrounded more realpolitik-focused goals.

These dynamics can be clearly observed in the international community's dealings with Iran. Restoring nuclear deterrence via the JCPOA has been a key objective of Western governments over the past few years. Not risking Iran's negotiation capital and reformers' domestic backing has been a guiding theme in EU and U.S. governments' dealings with the Islamic Republic. The effects of this approach have been sorely felt by human rights organizations lobbying for the release of Iranian and foreign political prisoners in Iran. Iranian-British dual national Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was held by the Iranian authorities for almost six years as leverage for a debt owed by the United Kingdom over its failure to deliver tanks to Iran in 1979. Other political prisoners, especially dual nationals, have seen their fates tied to larger Iranian geopolitical designs and have become bargaining chips as part of Iran's leverage over foreign governments.

The war in Ukraine and the EU's need to diversify its energy supply away from Russia boosted the geopolitical capital of Gulf energy exporters, especially gas champion Qatar. The outlook of a new regional security alliance between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE has raised the leverage of all three states in their relations with the United States. That has led to a rapprochement between Washington and Riyadh,

whose relations had cooled after the killing of Khashoggi. Similarly, human rights defenders report that the UAE's regional geopolitical role today makes the Emirates inviolable and immune to international advocacy campaigns.

CONCLUSION

In the MENA region, domestic, regional, and global politics are deeply intertwined. Some civic actors have been able to effectively navigate the region's new geopolitical context. But many others have struggled to align their mainly domestic agendas with these regional and global dynamics. Several nonstate actors in the region have been influential geopolitical players for decades, and some patterns of adaptation can be identified. By and large, however, MENA civic actors have yet to meaningfully adapt to an era of intensified interstate competition.

Among the most important linkages between geopolitics and civil society is the way in which the rise of geopolitics affects civil society's ability to raise its profile and alter the priorities of states. To the degree that both civic activism and regimes' efforts to control it have moved online, the biggest front line for civil society geopolitics is now in the digital sphere. The aspirations of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to expand their regional influence as digital tech hubs is of particular concern in this regard. Digital activism presents an opportunity to jump-start the capacities of players that lack traditional geopolitical assets, potentially shifting the balance of power among societal forces—to the benefit or detriment of civil society.

CHAPTER 6

NONSTATE ACTORS, GEOPOLITICS, AND CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

HAFSA HALAWA

Civil society involvement in violent conflict provides a particularly stark example of the geopoliticization of civic actors.¹¹⁵ Conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have endured for over a decade since the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings descended into violent confrontation. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad unleashed war on his people, resulting in the largest population displacement in history, while in Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition's war against the Houthis has driven the world's biggest humanitarian crisis.

Elsewhere, Libya has become a theater for the proxy involvement of regional actors as well as global superpowers such as Russia; European states have supported different sides in this conflict according to their national agendas. The twenty-year-long conflict in Iraq endures as internal strife threatens to break out into a new civil war, while in Sudan, all major regional and global powers meet in a competitive standoff as the country moves through its first years after the presidency of Omar al-Bashir.

Nonstate actors have been crucial to all of these conflicts, particularly where these actors are engaged in violence. Various interest groups and countries, many of which assist each other in one place while being adversarial elsewhere, have backed nonstate actors in these conflicts. It is particularly in theaters of conflict that powerful states have sought to commandeer nonstate actors for geopolitical ends, often blurring the lines between standard civil society organizations (CSOs) and militarily active groups.

Many of the countries in MENA that are now in conflict had little to no active civil society before the 2011 uprisings. International powers then flooded conflict zones with financial and military support that flowed through to nonstate actors, armed and unarmed alike. As the wars have unfolded, the digitization of conflict has deepened polarization. Social media has been a primary tool in spreading misinformation and disinformation and in fostering culture wars that have penetrated societies and deepened social

fractures, which will endure long after the fighting stops. This is another aspect in which international geopolitics has conditioned the nonstate sphere in MENA conflicts. Finally, funding from external actors has been geared toward influencing the court of public opinion to drive support for these actors' positions in the conflicts.

REGIONAL CONFLICT DYNAMICS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

External direct or indirect armed backing has served a wider range of international interests as more MENA countries have descended into war. This backing includes Russian involvement in the war in Syria; the activities of the quartet of Egypt, France, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Libya; Qatar's and Turkey's engagements in Libya, Syria, and beyond; and the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. The most documented intervention by a proxy actor—and one that created a large geopolitical fault line across MENA—was that of the Islamist-supporting Qatari leadership, which sought to promote Islamist oppositions both in nascent transitions to democracy and in the early stages of conflicts or counterrevolutions.

Civic actors have found themselves trapped both physically and financially in the visceral geopolitics of conflict by the broader proxy wars that are playing out. The battle for the hearts and minds of citizens across the region has translated into moves by proxy actors to expand their conflict support to include traditionally unarmed, nonviolent civic actors as a means for these proxies to promote their messaging and policies. The most widely reported example of this approach is Russia's direct engagement in the Syrian war. In this case, hefty support for illiberal civic actors has coincided with substantial military backing.

Russia's Involvement in Syria

As Russian bombs dropped on Aleppo led to an all-out siege of the city's millions of residents, Russia has used Syrian and Arab civic actors to promote its policies and spread misinformation about its role in the war, the Assad regime and its practices, and the opposition and armed rebels Russia and Syria are fighting against. Support for nonstate actors has also been military in nature, in an especially direct example of geopolitical tool kits that extend beyond traditional state-to-state tactics. In Syria, Russia has targeted its support for nonstate actors by providing funding to elevate pro-regime narratives and groups and by weaving regime messaging into civil society networks and platforms.

This type of support has had a specific, two-pronged effect. First, because many of these nonstate actors include female voices, support for them has visibly politicized and polarized the question of gender in the broader civil society debate. This has negatively impacted the role of female human rights defenders and feminist movements in the region, which were already disadvantaged by an inherently male-dominated society and are more widely targeted online. Second, funding for think tanks and institutions that support the Assad regime has elevated illiberal policies in foreign policy making, splitting advocacy movements and effectively poisoning the multilateral system, including by politicizing basic humanitarian efforts for war-torn areas.

The Digitization of Conflict

Concurrently, social media has become a new venue to share and debate issues in the digital era and, as such, has become the new playground for external actors. Online trolls have worked to discredit and silence liberal voices in traditional forms of civil society, including through threats and intimidation, which have forced groups to become less visible and focus on more minor outcomes related to direct community engagement on a smaller scale. This, in turn, has threatened these organizations' funding from partners that see fewer results and less impact in a conflict context where the narrative remains inherently focused on armed factions and continued fighting.

While externally coordinated bot armies have previously been deployed to combat opposition figures, there is a new and disturbing trend toward external powers funding illiberal civic actors who spread false information about conflicts, support authoritarian regimes, and instrumentalize the media blackouts in many conflict zones. In the current confrontations, state-supported media, backed by proxy actors such as Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, have sought to question the facts provided by those on the ground, discredit citizen journalists, and offer state-funded tourist trips for social media influencers to present half-truths about the state of a country and its conflict.

An emerging tactic has been for geopolitical powers to use local and social media promoters in partnership with government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) from the proxy countries to spread false narratives about the wars in the neighborhood. For example, Egypt's military involvement in Libya and the security-dominated Egyptian mainstream media have supported the narrative that Egypt's interest in peace would be realized by backing Libya's eastern forces, led by General Khalifa Haftar.

Furthering this agenda by housing and financing parties to the Libyan conflict, Egypt and the UAE have acted as platforms from which to shape narratives about the conflict and mobilize their supporters. By promoting a narrative of combating the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated government in Tripoli, the two countries have substantially altered and influenced analyses of the conflict. In doing so, they have successfully vilified several civilian actors, describing them as dangerous Islamists. Such narratives partly fueled support for the regional blockade of Qatar that has lasted for much of the past decade. The media, digital, and civic spheres have fused as part of a wider cross-border geopolitical conflict dynamic.

Proxy Tactics

Meanwhile, in other places, governments use and stir sectarian divisions as part of their involvement in a conflict. Iran and its proxies, like Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, have widened their military engagements in the region to include more actions in the civic sphere. Iranian support for the PMF has come in the form of building grassroots legitimacy by providing basic services like healthcare and subsidies for essential goods and the Arbreen religious pilgrimage. Such external support has extended to nonstate actors who partner with armed groups, are allied to a particular political actor or sectarian group, or are merely active in areas where such groups are powerful.

At the same time, Iran and its proxies increasingly stoke anger toward certain reformist civic actors and have fomented conspiracies against the West. Civil society groups in Iraq are regularly threatened, intimidated, and accused of being foreign agents in attempts to strangle their activities, especially their efforts to limit the role of militias in Iraq's public and political space. During Iraq's 2019–2021 protests, militia leaders called for the removal of foreign hands, unleashing violence against thousands of unarmed young men and women as they took to the streets to protest against the country's leaders.

In Iraq, Libya, and other conflict contexts, similar tactics have been used by other proxy actors, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and others. Where funding for nonstate actors is a less prominent factor, access to traditional and social media and diplomatic access to regimes have provided nonstate actors with a valuable and visible presence that opposition political parties cannot reach. More recently, offers of residence from Egypt, Qatar, and the UAE, and of citizenship from Turkey, have been used to support directly funded or politically aligned civil society actors. The ability to provide a pathway for security and safety has become a valuable commodity in promoting politicized groups or proxy-backed actors.

Turkey's Regional Role

Turkey's geopolitical concerns have also had an impact on the country's actions toward civil society actors on conflict-related issues. Turkey leverages its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to promote its security role in the region, despite inflicting massive harm as a direct military power in Iraq and Syria in the name of defending itself against the insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The more entrenched Turkey becomes in the protracted conflict against the PKK and its Kurdish-backed allies, the more legal, social, and financial rules Turkey heaps on civil society groups that have found refuge in the country. These include not least the hundreds of Syrian organizations that have followed the displacement of over 3.7 million Syrian citizens to Turkey since 2011.¹¹⁶ Many groups talk about needing to tone down their rhetoric or, in some cases, cease their work entirely in specific areas of Syria to keep their Turkish residence or legal status, as ordered by the Turkish authorities.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN CONFLICT

As these geopolitical dynamics intensify, they are having a major impact on traditional, long-standing partnerships between Western powers and CSOs in the MENA region. Geopolitical fault lines continue to shift so dramatically that there is now growing discontent with traditional Western donors and allies. Civic actors who are funded by the international community find themselves questioning the policies and moral authority of their allies.

A crisis of identity and realpolitik, particularly as a result of the Syrian war, has led these groups to seek alternative, more independent ways to mobilize resources. Crowdfunding and the search for philanthropic donors, including from the region, instead of government funds, have become active strands of funding

strategies. Some civic groups have decided to distance their policies or advocacy goals from Western governments' foreign policies. This civil society repositioning is having geopolitical consequences in terms of the West's presence and alliances in the region.

Much of this shift can be encapsulated in the relationship between local civil society in conflict and the United Nations (UN). In Syria, CSOs' ongoing accusations that the UN has allied with the Assad regime to secure nominal amounts of vital funds and resources have damaged the body's relationship with broader civil society. In Libya, the UN experiences the same criticism, albeit with less deadly results, as civil society chastises the organization's continued goal to implement a 2012 political agreement that has regularly failed to gain the endorsement of successive political configurations in the country.

In addition, despite long-standing relationships with civil society, the United States has experienced its own domestic crisis of values. This has contributed to further distancing from values and principled policies in the region, leading civic actors to move away from the United States as a primary donor and backer. Although this trend was exacerbated during the presidency of Donald Trump, the return to Democratic leadership under President Joe Biden has not brought with it the sought-after U-turn on supporting authoritarians in the region, leaving civil society feeling increasingly vulnerable in its relationship with the United States. Middle Eastern civil society has been squeezed between the geopolitical interventions of Russia, the Gulf states, and other powers, on the one hand, and the indecision of actors including the United States and the UN, on the other.

This situation has presented a significant gap for Europe to fill in support of traditionally like-minded civil society, as civic actors in the region generally view the European agenda as softer than that of the United States. But the European Union (EU) has not yet fully stepped forward to play this role. The EU has funded CSOs in conflict zones as part of its geopolitical agenda but does not compete at the same level of direct engagement as other external and proxy powers.

Moreover, a double-standards propaganda battle has emerged amid the ongoing war in Ukraine: many MENA CSOs feel bitter that the EU is providing the kind of strong support to Ukrainian civil society that it has declined to offer in the Middle East, despite the region's geographic proximity to Europe. However, for the EU, the broader geopolitical aim to support liberal civil society risks alienating civic partners by being implemented alongside the goals of countering Russian influence and serving a local priority before a regional commitment. In short, civil society support has also become part of the EU's geopolitical calculus in conflict zones.

A Geopolitical Realignment

The impact of all of these trends is that geopolitical dynamics are driving new divisions in MENA civil society. For many civic actors, there are few places left to turn. Communities have been split as money from conflict-driving actors, such as Egypt, the Gulf states, Iran, Israel, Russia, and Turkey, divides traditional alliances within a civil society built on a unified set of principles. Many civil society activists now find themselves regularly sparring online or in person with old friends and colleagues, bitterly divided by conflicts and political positions. Many also find themselves physically threatened online or harassed by

local security forces in their countries of residence because of their work. This is a particular risk for female civic actors. So palpable are the mistrust and anger among civil society, and the suspicion over who funds what and whom, that there is neither unity nor any notable attempts to redraw civic space in a manner that corresponds purely to values or commitments to civic engagement.

Civic actors are caught in a geopolitical tussle for influence, power, and money that has greatly determined not just whether conflict occurs and who sits on the right side but even the principles and values that should command and steer civic engagement. Across the region, intellectuals, journalists, activists, and opposition politicians have all engaged in the wider trends of questioning facts, spreading misinformation and disinformation, and dismantling traditional forms of advocacy and desired governance. Meanwhile, perceived U.S. and European double standards in the promotion of values have created a crisis of the so-called liberal alliance.

Across the Middle East, geopolitical fault lines are taking hold that encourage the prioritization of rapprochement and détente over division and conflict. In this context, civic actors are likely to find it almost impossible to reset the game and return to a more standard form of doing business. Rather, it is more probable that the geopolitical lines drawn at the local and regional levels across civil society will remain determined by the policies of allies and backers—even where established divisions dissolve and are replaced by less acrimonious diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

Conflict has ended the long-standing features of civil society in the Middle East, leaving Western foreign policies adrift. It is not clear that there can or will be a reset of the values-based principles according to which foreign policy and funding parameters are set in conflict zones. For this to happen, the international community and regional civil society alike would need to acknowledge that the new role of civil society actors includes countering narratives and misinformation spread among themselves, within their own communities, and about their own former allies.

Concurrently, to inform potential responses, the international community should conduct a broader examination of the ways foreign policy reflects on civic actors and the trends in civil society. To merely box actors into pro- or anti-liberal designations ignores the complexities of the conflicts and dynamics in the region and portrays the situation dishonestly. Nevertheless, as conflict dynamics shift amid a broader geopolitical realignment of actors, global factors including access to energy, the role of natural resources, climate shocks, and access to food, nutrition, and healthcare will force countries and their proxy civic actors to engage with each other. Possibly, these factors will even force states and proxies to cross their dividing lines to redress the cracks in their own communities away from the policies of those who fund and arm them.

POLAND'S CIVIL SOCIETY IS CAUGHT BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST

PAWEŁ MARCZEWSKI

Governments have been using forced movements of large populations as part of hostile actions against rival states or groups of states for a long time. But in recent decades, this method of exerting pressure during interstate hostilities has become increasingly frequent. With stronger commitments from democratic countries to protect refugees and asylum seekers comes a greater risk that authoritarian and dictatorial states will use “weapons of mass migration,” to borrow political scientist Kelly M. Greenhill’s phrase, to challenge their adversaries economically, politically, and sometimes militarily.¹¹⁷

The conditions that force large groups of people to migrate in a very short time may or may not be a result of war or occupation. Sometimes, these conditions are caused by extreme, postconflict poverty or the deliberate withdrawal of assistance from a population badly affected by severe environmental challenges triggered by climate change. Regardless of the direct causes, forced migrations used as weapons have one thing in common: they are created or allowed to happen by governments that hope to use them for their benefit in conflicts with other countries.

Increasingly, civil society is caught up in this highly geopolitical trend. When forced migrations become part of the arsenal of hostile measures in interstate rivalry, humanitarian civil society organizations (CSOs) that assist migrants become involuntary actors in these confrontations. These organizations are forced to make difficult choices: To what extent do they cooperate with their national governments, which might decide to disregard human rights and stop people from crossing the border at all costs? How can CSOs explain their actions to a concerned general public? And what can they do in order not to serve the goals of states that use forced migration as a weapon?

Recently, a double crisis of forced migration in Poland—first at the border with Belarus, then as a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—presented the civic sector with exactly this set of difficult choices. Although this crisis led to a large-scale humanitarian mobilization, the Polish government missed this opportunity not only to boost cooperation with the civic sector but also, and more significantly, to strengthen Poland’s resilience in the face of geopolitical rivalry based on weaponized forced migration.

THE ORIGINS OF THE CRISIS

After the August 9, 2020, presidential election in Belarus, the country’s Central Election Commission announced that Alexander Lukashenko, an autocrat who has ruled the country since 1994, had won another term with 80 percent of the vote.¹¹⁸ In response, thousands of citizens took to the streets, accusing the incumbent and the commission of committing electoral fraud and of robbing Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the candidate of the united opposition, of her victory. Protesters had strong grounds for their claims, as many officials from polling stations across the country broke ranks and revealed blatant cases of falsified results.¹¹⁹ Lukashenko responded to the demonstrations with force, sending police troops to beat and arrest protesters. In the weeks and months to follow, Belarus would witness mass incarcerations, and all opposition leaders would find themselves either in jail or in exile.

The European Union (EU) strongly condemned the violations of human rights and the trampling of democratic standards by the Belarusian regime. Josep Borrell, the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, announced as early as August 14 that the union would impose sanctions on officials responsible for electoral fraud and the suppression of protests. On October 2, the European Council imposed a first round of sanctions, including asset freezes and travel bans, on forty key Belarusian officials. Four rounds of further restrictive measures followed, targeting 195 individuals and thirty-five entities.¹²⁰

In May 2021, Lukashenko responded to the sanctions by indirectly announcing his intention to instrumentalize migrants for the purpose of exerting pressure on EU. “We stopped drugs and migrants. Now you will eat them and catch them yourselves,” he threatened.¹²¹ According to various sources, including Lithuanian Interior Minister Agnė Bilotaitė, who confirmed the move in the Lithuanian Parliament, Belarusian officials were involved in the organized transportation of illegal migrants.¹²² People looking for a way to enter the EU were flown to Minsk, mainly from Iran, Iraq, or Syria, and transported to Belarus’s Polish or Lithuanian border, where they could attempt to cross without being stopped by Belarusian border guards. In an interview on June 27, Bilotaitė stated that the number of people caught illegally entering Lithuania from Belarus in 2021 was already seven times higher than in 2020 and twelve times higher than in 2019.¹²³

But the situation escalated further in fall 2021. Border guards reported dozens of illegal crossings between Belarus and Poland. On September 2, Polish President Andrzej Duda issued a decree imposing a state of emergency in the region, effectively banning all nonresidents—among them, humanitarian organizations

and the media—from accessing the area. At the peak of the crisis, when the largest group of migrants marched toward a closed border checkpoint in the northeastern Polish village of Kuźnica, a Polish government spokesman estimated that there were 4,000 migrants in the region.¹²⁴

CSOS AS HOSTAGES IN A HYBRID WAR

Since the beginning of the crisis, numerous activists and local residents in Poland have organized help for people stranded in forests along the country's border with Belarus. Unable to officially enter EU territory and pushed back by border guards on both sides, many forced migrants have tried to cross the frontier far from checkpoints. As stated in a 2021 report by Border Group, an informal association of organizations and activist groups that assist migrants at the border,

[The migrants] were stuck in a border zone as hostages in a political power play between Alexander Lukashenko's regime, on one side, and Poland with the EU, on the other. On both sides, densely stationed functionaries catch them, transport them to the border, and push them to the other side. Belarusians do not let them return to Minsk or their countries of origin, and Poles deny them entry and the possibility to apply for international protection.¹²⁵

Humanitarian organizations and activists who provide material and legal help to people stuck in border zones also found themselves taken hostage in an interstate conflict. When Poland declared the state of emergency, all nonresidents were effectively banned from the area. Local people had to deliver food and water, blankets, and warm clothes to those hiding in the forests. However, anyone who provided any kind of assistance to migrants attempting to cross the border and apply for international protection risked the criminal charges of assisting a person to acquire illegal residence in Poland or to illegally cross the border. Although under both Polish and international law, such assistance is punishable only when the person helping receives personal benefits, monetary or otherwise, the Polish authorities used a very broad definition of benefit to penalize any form of assistance to migrants.¹²⁶

The Polish government not only unlawfully penalized activists who helped forced migrants but also publicly vilified them as Russian President Vladimir Putin's "useful idiots." For example, Sebastian Kaleta, Poland's vice minister of justice, tweeted,

"In Poland, useful idiots like Maja Ostaszewska [a popular Polish actress engaged in helping forced migrants at the border] organize tear-jerking conferences that help Russian propaganda in creating the image of Poland as guilty of the crisis. Guilty, because it protects its borders and does not let in migrants, in a situation where the Kremlin conceived a plan to use migrants as a new kind of weapon in a hybrid war" (author's translation).¹²⁷

Kaleta was probably correct when he stated that the plan to pressure the EU by concentrating large groups of migrants at the border was conceived by—or, at least, coordinated with—Russia. In November 2021, when the humanitarian crisis escalated, Belarus and Russia signed a deal that effectively merged their

gas and financial markets. After Lukashenko's crackdown on the opposition and the European sanctions that followed, Belarus became increasingly economically, politically, and militarily dependent on Russia. But it is difficult to perceive Kaleta's argument that admitting a couple of thousand forced migrants could destabilize or threaten Poland and the EU as anything more than a propaganda stunt. In fact, this argument was soon tested when Poland allowed millions of refugees from Ukraine to enter after the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022.

TWO CLASSES OF REFUGEE

According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, almost 5.3 million people crossed the border from Ukraine into Poland between February 24 and August 9, 2022.¹²⁸ Nearly 1.3 million refugees registered for EU temporary protection or Polish national protection, and nearly as many obtained Polish identification numbers, which allow access to public education and healthcare as well as family benefits. Although the Polish authorities could have extended temporary protection to refugees on Poland's border with Belarus and refugees from Ukraine without Ukrainian citizenship, they decided against it. This decision resulted in the creation of two categories of refugee: those who were granted temporary residence and access to public services and those who had to go through complicated and uncertain legal procedures to avoid deportation.

In the first weeks after the full-fledged Russian invasion of Ukraine, many thousands of people decided to seek shelter in Poland. At the peak of the crisis of migration forced by Russia's military aggression, on March 6–7, 2022, more than 140,000 people crossed Ukraine's border with Poland each day. In the following weeks, the numbers gradually dropped, but more than 20,000 continue to cross every day as of this writing.¹²⁹

The arrival of so many people in need of shelter and assistance would have created a humanitarian crisis on a huge scale were it not for the quick and massive mobilization of CSOs, volunteers, activists, and citizens offering various forms of help to the refugees. Train stations and bus depots were turned into temporary shelters and food distribution centers. Thousands of Poles donated food, medical supplies, clothes, and other essentials. According to a 2022 report by the Polish Economic Institute, the material help provided to Ukrainian refugees by Poles was worth 10 billion zloty (\$2.2 billion).¹³⁰ Poles also offered refugees temporary accommodation in their own homes and apartments, averting the need to create large refugee camps.

Civil society undertook all of these humanitarian efforts with very little to no help from the government. State assistance came later and was much more limited in scope. For example, at the end of February 2022, the governmental National Freedom Institute–Center for Civil Society Development offered grants to CSOs that assist refugees, but the total amount given was only 1.5 million zloty (\$331,800).¹³¹

Many organizations that helped Ukrainian refugees, for example the Border Group coalition, were also assisting forced migrants on Poland's border with Belarus. However, these organizations' situations were radically different depending on which category of migrants they were assisting. Helping refugees from Ukraine made them part of the national effort to aid victims of Putin's war and earned them praise from the Polish government. Assisting forced migrants on the border with Belarus, meanwhile, was still perceived by the authorities as a criminal activity; restrictions on movement in the region were maintained until July 1, 2022.

The two crises of forced migration were also perceived differently by Polish public opinion. In a September 2021 poll by the Center for the Study of Public Opinion (CBOS), 52 percent of respondents declared that they were against allowing forced migrants at the Polish-Belarusian border to apply for asylum in Poland.¹³² Seventy-seven percent said they favored stronger control of the border. In April 2022, CBOS asked whether refugees from war zones in Ukraine should be admitted to Poland; 91 percent of respondents were in favor.¹³³

The different social perceptions and legal ramifications of assisting forced migrants on the border with Belarus and refugees from Ukraine resulted in civil society providing a very different scale and form of help in each case. At the Belarusian border, local residents delivered essential goods like food and water to those in need, as CSOs were not allowed to enter the area because of the state of emergency. Organizations that provided legal assistance had to wait until the forced migrants had managed to enter Polish territory and submit an official application for international protection. Help was therefore limited and provided by either professional activists or compassionate locals. In the case of the refugees from Ukraine, by contrast, there was a national mobilization of the whole of civil society, from regular citizens to professionals. The 2022 study by the Polish Economic Institute showed that 77 percent of Poles have been engaged in helping Ukrainian refugees at different stages of war.¹³⁴

WASTED POTENTIAL FOR GREATER RESILIENCE

The two crises of forced migration, on Poland's Belarusian and Ukrainian borders, have presented Polish civil society with unprecedented challenges. When Lukashenko's regime started to exert pressure on Poland and the EU by transporting migrants to the border zone, many organizations that had previously helped migrants and asylum seekers in their integration efforts had to channel some of their activities into providing humanitarian aid in a situation where all such efforts were potentially criminalized. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Polish civil society—both institutionalized and informal—mobilized on a massive scale to help numbers of refugees that Europe has not witnessed since World War II.

This mobilization could have been an impulse for new coordination mechanisms to improve cooperation between CSOs and the government, as it was civil society that prevented a humanitarian catastrophe. It was also thanks to civic efforts that Poland garnered praise as a “humanitarian superpower,” to use the

phrase coined by U.S. Ambassador to Poland Mark Brzezinski.¹³⁵ For a country that had been criticized for not accepting any migrants or asylum seekers during the European crisis of forced migration in 2015, civil society's large-scale engagement in 2020–2022 could have been an opportunity to completely change global perceptions of Poland's migration policies.

However, this opportunity did not become a reality. In a 2021 study, only 37 percent of Polish CSOs declared that they had any contact, even sporadic, with the central government. The funds allocated to the third sector by the government in 2020 constituted only 17 percent of the government's budget, compared with 22 percent in 2017.¹³⁶ Because of the double standards adopted by the central government toward Ukrainian refugees and forced migrants on the Belarusian border, many CSOs that helped anybody seeking refuge in Poland remained very skeptical about cooperating with the government.

For its part, the government focused mostly on financing access to public services and social security benefits for Ukrainian refugees under temporary protection; the Polish Economic Institute estimated the annual costs of this financing at 0.61 percent of Polish gross domestic product.¹³⁷ The government also started a program of refunding citizens who provided shelter for refugees in their homes: citizens could apply for 40 zloty (\$8.80) for each day that they hosted refugees, for up to 120 days.¹³⁸ The cost of the program was estimated at 2 billion zloty (\$440 million).¹³⁹

Aside from the administrative problems that caused many delays with the payouts, the program ignored the fact that many Ukrainian refugees stayed with Ukrainian friends or relatives already living in Poland before February 24, 2022, and that many Ukrainians rented accommodation. More importantly, cash programs did not contribute to any new forms of cooperation between the government and civic partners with regard to integration policies or humanitarian assistance. The remarkable civic mobilization to help Ukrainian refugees remained an opportunity that was missed by the government.

The cost of this missed opportunity is not only wasted potential for better integration of migrants and refugees into Polish society but also weaker resilience against new forms of geopolitical rivalry, such as hybrid wars in which forced migration is used as a weapon. Russian disinformation campaigns quickly became part of the Polish media landscape after February 2022. Some of the tropes used by propagandists to advance Russian interests have included false information that issuing identification numbers to Ukrainian refugees means granting full citizenship or that the social security benefits available to refugees greatly exceed those available to Polish citizens.¹⁴⁰

So far, these campaigns have been unsuccessful in turning Polish public opinion against helping Ukrainian refugees, but the number of Poles who are against accepting them is gradually growing, from 3 percent in March 2022 to 12 percent in June 2022.¹⁴¹ Prolonged war will unfortunately further diminish Poles' readiness to help the refugees. At some point, Russian disinformation efforts might prove much more successful. And because of a lack of coordination between Poland's government and CSOs, these efforts will be much more difficult to combat.

CHAPTER 8

CIVIC ACTIVISM AGAINST GEOPOLITICS: THE CASE OF UKRAINE

KATERYNA ZAREMBO

Ukraine is a clear-cut and important case of civil society adopting a geopolitical perspective.¹⁴² From the Revolution of Dignity and the Russian hybrid aggression in 2014 to the full-scale Russian invasion launched in February 2022, Ukraine’s civil society has taken on a high-profile role. It is important, however, to put an immediate caveat on the use of the term “geopolitical rivalry” in Ukraine’s case. This concept can be too easily confused with Russian propaganda messages, which aim at portraying Ukraine as a territory without agency. Yet, geopolitical rivalry in this context lies in the contest between Ukraine’s existence as a free and democratic state, on the one hand, and Russia’s vision of the country as its own stateless periphery, on the other.

In this struggle, Ukrainian civil society has come to the fore over the last decade. Ukraine’s post-2014 civil society influence has two elements, corresponding to formal and informal civic activism. While in relatively peaceful times, professional nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are most prominent, at times of existential threat, informal civil society steps forward—especially in those parts of the country under occupation. These trends in civic activism, evident from Ukraine’s recent history of wars and revolutions, have led to the label of a dormant civil society—a powerful undercurrent that manifests itself at times when it is needed most.¹⁴³

Significantly in the context of this volume, Ukraine’s civil society has served as a defense and resistance actor. This is an atypical role for civil society in its classic interpretation and one that reflects geopolitical challenges. While professional civil society organizations (CSOs) have preserved their watchdog and advocacy functions, other civic actors have played a rearguard action role since 2014—and even more so under the current Russian invasion. In this sense, it can be difficult to draw a line between where society ends and civil society begins, as a wide range of civic actors engages directly with geopolitical dynamics.

THE FORMAL FACE OF UKRAINE'S CIVIL SOCIETY

Several CSOs in Ukraine, especially think tanks like the New Europe Center, the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism,” and the Razumkov Center, engage directly with geopolitics. Many others link their work to geopolitical interests, mainly through a focus on cooperation with the European Union (EU) and support for a liberal, prodemocracy agenda. Civic activists who work on environmental issues, women’s rights, or local government accountability have generally linked their actions since 2014 to promoting Ukraine’s choice of a pro-European path. These activists defend and promote these issues as European values directly opposed to Russian authoritarianism. The 184 Ukrainian organizations that belong to the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum focus on policy areas from education and entrepreneurship to the rule of law and human rights.¹⁴⁴

Ukrainian CSOs have increasingly concentrated on European integration as the path to the rule of law and prosperity and a counter to Russian attempts to undermine and destroy the Ukrainian state. At the same time, Ukrainian CSOs stand against Russia for the sake of Ukraine itself and do not see resisting Russia as synonymous with campaigning for European integration. Yet, the geopolitical context has led more and more CSOs to take an interest in the process of EU cooperation.

This trend has produced a sandwich effect in the cooperation between Ukraine’s civil society, government, and international partners: CSOs that are oriented toward professional advocacy pressure the government from below, while the country’s Western partners do the same from above.¹⁴⁵ Since 2019, Ukraine’s pro-European society and European integration course have been included in the country’s constitution, making it easier for Ukraine’s stakeholders to push through reforms when they have a European label attached.¹⁴⁶

Contrary to many external perceptions, Ukrainian society is not deeply split on this pro-European outlook. Virtually all parts of civil society perceive Russia as having a clear negative role.¹⁴⁷ Pro-Russian NGOs are in a marginal minority.¹⁴⁸ Ukrainian civil society is increasingly pushing to raise the profile of geopolitical imperatives in Ukraine’s relationship with the EU; geopolitics has become part of civil society’s toolbox. Ukrainian CSOs work with the government to criticize the EU for its lack of support, and they work with the EU to press the government for reforms and to develop capacity-building and resilience programs with a geopolitical element.

Ukrainian CSOs cooperated with the EU to build an anticorruption infrastructure through institutions like the National Anticorruption Bureau, the Specialized Anticorruption Prosecutor’s Office, the National Agency on Corruption Prevention, the State Bureau of Investigation, and the High Anticorruption Court. Over 130 Ukrainian civil society experts in the Reanimation Package of Reforms, an NGO, produced and drove forward a road map of reforms.¹⁴⁹

Civil society also played a major role in the campaign for Ukraine’s EU candidate status. In July 2022, 200 organizations from across Ukraine signed a civil society appeal for the EU to grant Ukraine this status.¹⁵⁰ Numerous Ukrainian CSOs have been involved in developing arguments for EU policymakers, advocating in EU capitals, and providing expertise to help the Ukrainian government fill out the questionnaire that

the European Commission sends to prospective EU member states. Ukraine's authorities openly sought CSOs' help in the application process both in preparing answers to the questionnaire and in advocating a positive decision on Ukraine's candidacy in EU member state capitals.¹⁵¹

Crucially, CSOs have sometimes pushed to make sure that realpolitik-driven geopolitics do not overshadow human rights and democratic reform. Ukrainian human rights organizations were strongly critical of Western partners over reform of the Security Service of Ukraine. While the EU approved of a government bill for making partial progress toward reform, local human rights organizations condemned the draft legislation for containing new clauses that were potentially even more discriminatory than the current law.¹⁵² The Center for Civil Liberties, a renowned human rights NGO, criticized Western partners for not pushing hard enough to free Ukrainian political prisoners in Russia because, according to the center's representatives, the West relies exclusively on the rule of law, while Russia dismisses this concept.¹⁵³

Notably, CSOs have retained this kind of critical focus even during the current invasion. Ukraine's professional civil society has maintained its watchdog function throughout the war. Since February 2022, NGOs have invested much effort in international advocacy for weapons for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia, but domestic criticism of the Ukrainian government and authorities has remained. Some of this criticism relates to the war and defense issues; for example, the potential rejection of Ukraine's aspiration of membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in favor of a compromise with Russia, discussed in March 2022, provoked a fierce reaction from activists.¹⁵⁴ But anticorruption campaigners have continued their work, too, lobbying for a new and more independent, committed head of the Specialized Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office and criticizing the government's new anticorruption strategy as too soft.¹⁵⁵ CSOs are alert to the risk of the war becoming a pretext for a setback to democratic reforms.

It should be highlighted that since February 2022, Ukraine's civil society has acquired another dimension: internationalization. According to the United Nations, as of October 2022, some 7.7 million Ukrainians had been displaced as refugees, mostly to the EU, and around 4.5 million had registered for temporary protection in Europe.¹⁵⁶ While many of these physically and psychologically traumatized people might not be ready to immediately take voluntary action for a social cause, existing Ukrainian networks abroad have incorporated newly arrived Ukrainians and reinvented or boosted their purpose. The most notable examples are Vitsche Berlin in Germany, which organizes protests and engages in raising awareness and cultural work, and Ukrainian activism in Poland led by Natalia Panchenko, who has been active for at least a decade, from organizing protests and demonstrations across Europe in support of Ukraine to blocking Russian trucks on the Polish-Belarusian border.¹⁵⁷

UKRAINE'S INFORMAL CIVIL SOCIETY

Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, triggered a more prominent form of activism from Ukraine's informal civil society, as opposed to professional NGOs. While in 2021, 85 percent of Ukrainians did not belong to any civic or political association and only 4 percent were actively involved in a CSO, this situation was reversed after the Russian attack.¹⁵⁸ Since the war started, some 80 percent of Ukraine's

population has been involved in defending the country in one way or another, with 45 percent donating money, 35 percent volunteering, and 18 percent participating in information resistance.¹⁵⁹ Ukrainian society has become a de facto defense actor.

Back in the early 2010s, Ukrainian community organizations had already begun to provide hard security by establishing self-defense units during the Euromaidan demonstrations and volunteer battalions after the beginning of hostilities in eastern Ukraine. These organizations helped procure military equipment for the troops and provided logistical services like medical or clerical work, even at the front lines. And they were increasingly involved in the monitoring and oversight of defense-related issues and military operations in Ukraine's Donbas region.¹⁶⁰

Civil society has therefore performed the function of security provider, which is normally a state monopoly—and it is precisely because Ukraine's state institutions were weak that civil society had to intervene. It is important to underline that most of these efforts have been informal, both in 2014–2016 and since February 2022: at times of war, when human lives and state sovereignty are at stake, action eclipses formality in importance. Moreover, informal activities are the only possible type of activism in Ukraine's occupied territories. There, civil society's defense functions have merged with civic—that is, unarmed—protest and resistance.

While in Ukraine's free territories the country's civil society can operate freely and register its organizations without hindrance, in the occupied territories only informal civil society—unregistered groups and individuals—can act. If civil society can be defined as “an intermediary sphere that works as a transmission belt between society, business and the state,” in the words of writer and activist Michael Edwards, then informal civil society in Ukraine's occupied territories engages in establishing links with the legitimate state, rather than the occupier state.¹⁶¹ With some 20 percent of Ukraine's territory occupied as of June 2022, this part of civil society is extremely important, because it is in the occupied territories that geopolitical rivalry is most acute.¹⁶²

The formal NGOs in the occupied parts of Donbas were forced to leave the region over the course of 2014, and most civil society leaders did so for fear of being captured and detained. Some, however, remained, like Ukrainian writer Stanislav Aseev, who until 2017 had lived in Donetsk and published columns on life under occupation in the Ukrainian weekly *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia*. He was detained by occupying forces in 2017 and spent almost three years in captivity before being released as part of a prisoner exchange. He later wrote a book about his imprisonment in an art space that had been converted into a concentration camp by the occupiers.¹⁶³

There are other people like Aseev who still live in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. These people engage in silent protests, like painting anonymous blue and yellow stripes on walls or roads to symbolize the Ukrainian flag.¹⁶⁴ Both before and after February 2022, Radio Liberty received calls and messages from the occupied territories, first as questions or stories and more recently as intelligence about the Russian forces' whereabouts.¹⁶⁵

Informal civil society has been active in the newly occupied territories of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, too. Kherson civil society has been resisting the occupation since day one. Horizontal and informal networks, like those established during the Euromaidan demonstrations, and a lack of coordination—specifically, the absence of designated resistance leaders or a command structure—made this resistance possible.

The public protests that continued in Kherson, Kakhovka, Melitopol, and other cities in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia for several weeks represented one form of resistance.¹⁶⁶ When Russian forces used weapons against the protesters at the end of March 2022, the protests decreased in size but continued in the form of seemingly spontaneous actions, like unconnected people walking in a park and then suddenly getting together, putting up a banner reading “Kherson is Ukraine,” taking a photo of themselves, and walking away again.¹⁶⁷

Other civil society activists focused their efforts on volunteering that was geared toward procuring food and medicines for those in need, providing psychological and informational help, and so on.¹⁶⁸ Further into the occupation, the resistance took the form of a guerrilla movement that put up flyers threatening the occupiers and organized online demonstrations. The group Yellow Ribbon was one of the key protagonists in this movement.¹⁶⁹ Other examples of resistance included lonely pickets, for example a disabled elderly man who played the Ukrainian national anthem at full volume in the Kherson central market.¹⁷⁰

While European aspirations as such did not play a significant role in either the discourse or the actions of this resisting society, the image of a pro-EU flyer in occupied Melitopol went viral on Ukrainian social media. The text of the poster read, “Fellow city residents! Don’t watch the Russian news! Ukraine continues to fight! On June 24, Ukraine will get EU candidate status” (see figure 1). Although Ukraine’s candidate status was not guaranteed at that point, the flyer speaks to the extent to which EU support was important for the morale of Ukrainian society in the occupied territories.

Russia deliberately targets civic activists in the occupied territories precisely because of their active positioning: civil society leaders have been detained, kidnapped, tortured, and killed. According to Ukrainian local authorities, at least 300 activists had been detained in Kherson as of July 2022.¹⁷¹ In October, Russian occupiers publicly hanged a woman in the occupied city of Skadovsk, allegedly for her pro-Ukrainian position.¹⁷²

CONCLUSION

In Ukraine, geopolitical factors are self-evidently paramount and directly relevant to civil society actors. For CSOs, the choice is not merely between two geopolitical vectors but between existence, sovereignty, and prosperity, on the one hand, and extermination and subjugation, on the other. This situation prompts both cooperation with and opposition to the Ukrainian government, and it has thickened civil society links, especially given the internationalization of Ukrainian civic activism. In these circumstances,

Ukrainian civil society has adopted an increasingly prominent and active role on these geopolitical factors and become an influential player in issues normally beyond the scope of CSOs. In short, Ukrainian civic activists' geopolitical positioning and role reflect a nation's struggle for survival. The extreme geopolitical circumstances have turned Ukrainian civil society into a powerful actor.

In some ways, this trend has pushed CSOs and informal groups to take on unfamiliar functions in the realms of security and foreign policy. At the same time, CSOs have doubled down on their more traditional role as watchdogs over state corruption, because they see state reforms as even more necessary to defend Ukraine against an aggressor. Overall, civil society has engaged formally and informally; across demographic characteristics such as place of residence, age, education, and gender; and in both free Ukraine and the occupied territories, becoming a security and defense actor in its own right. Civil society has become an integral part of Ukrainian responses to Russian hostility and incursions.

CHAPTER 9

COMPETING VALUES IN U.S. CIVIL SOCIETY AID

BENJAMIN PRESS

In recent decades, as other chapters in this volume illustrate, civil society actors around the world have found themselves grappling with a global contest between values systems. This clash is generally framed as being between Western-style liberal values and more traditional approaches to sociocultural life and is tied to an assumption that Western countries explicitly seek to support liberal values abroad. Many analysts see this growing values rift as integral to a widening geopolitical division between liberal democratic and illiberal authoritarian powers.¹⁷³

Such a framing, however, is too simplistic. The growing clash of sociopolitical values is playing out not only between countries but also within them. Domestic constituencies in countries around the world are fiercely debating questions and issues at the intersection of values and public life. As they do so, they are increasingly engaging with like-minded partners abroad to share ideas, strategies, and resources. This, in turn, is creating new international partnerships and coalitions that can cut across perceived geopolitical boundaries.

Civil society has been at the core of this dynamic. The globalization of values struggles has invigorated transnational collaboration among ideologically aligned civil society groups around the world. This trend has been especially visible among conservative organizations, which have built civil society partnerships across every region to promote traditional values, a more prominent place for religion in public life, uniform conceptions of marriage, and a host of other causes. These nongovernmental networks often cut across geopolitical boundaries: the U.S.-based International Organization for the Family, for example, partners with groups not only in geopolitically friendly countries, like Italy and the United Kingdom, but also adversarial ones, like Russia and Venezuela.¹⁷⁴

U.S. civil society, particularly U.S.-based groups' support for civil society abroad, has been key to the emergence of these transnational partnerships. Aid flows from American conservative groups to like-minded organizations internationally—flows that include not only money but also strategic advice, informational materials, and legal support—have grown in recent years. On issues ranging from expanding gun rights to countering abortion, American conservative nongovernmental organizations have sought to advance their civil society support objectives, which they frequently and explicitly contrast with those of liberal civil society supporters, like the Open Society Foundations. To achieve these goals, these organizations mirror the strategies employed by mainstream civil society supporters, especially by providing direct financial backing to partners abroad and engaging in capacity building, training, and advice.

Taking this broader view, it is clear that civil society support flowing from the United States is far from monolithic. Instead, the deep divisions and clashes over values that have fractured U.S. politics are being replicated in civil society support flows. Case studies on the National Rifle Association's (NRA's) support for international gun rights, conservative legal nonprofits' efforts to support like-minded lawyers abroad, and campaigns by conservative religious groups to oppose abortion across the globe illustrate how such conservative civil society support works and how it has changed the international sociopolitical landscape. These case studies show that civil society groups have to navigate competition not only between geopolitical adversaries but also between civil society supporters, often from the same country, that seek to advance very different values systems.

CASE STUDY 1: PROMOTING GUN RIGHTS

Gun control is one of the most polarizing topics in U.S. politics. Fierce debates over the merits or downsides of regulating firearms or, conversely, liberalizing their use have created deep divides over the role of government and how best to achieve public safety. However, although the omnipresence of guns may be a uniquely American phenomenon, debates about gun rights are not. Wading into gun rights campaigns abroad, U.S. conservative civil society groups—none more so than the NRA—have actively worked to support anti-gun control partners internationally.

Barred by its charter from giving money to groups abroad, the NRA has been unable to use its vast financial resources to support pro-gun efforts elsewhere. However, the group has provided extensive strategic guidance, educational material, and training to gun rights activists abroad. Across multiple global contexts, the NRA has helped gun rights organizations and activists to bring about dramatic political change. Reflecting the capacity-building strategies employed by many civil society supporters, the NRA has exported its ideas, strategies, and even institutional structures to pro-gun groups around the globe.

One of the earliest examples of the NRA's growing international role came in Australia in the early 1990s. After multiple mass killings in the mid-1980s and early 1990s spurred the country's state and federal governments to enact more restrictive gun laws, the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia (SSAA) sought support from its U.S. counterpart. In the early 1990s, the head of the SSAA made two trips to the NRA's headquarters to learn about effective lobbying and public relations (PR) strategies.¹⁷⁵ In a speech to the NRA board at the time, the group's head explicitly stated his ambition to emulate the NRA, stating,

“I believe we could not do any better than become the NRA of Australia.”¹⁷⁶ Shortly thereafter, the then NRA president, Robert Corbin, toured Australia in an effort to help the SSAA “learn NRA strategies that Australian gun owners could employ in their own fight for freedom.”¹⁷⁷ Only a few months later, the SSAA launched its Legislative Action arm, built explicitly in line with NRA advice and modeled on the NRA’s Institute for Legislative Action (NRA-ILA).

The NRA employed a similar approach in Canada. As Canada also sought to tighten gun laws in the mid-1990s, the NRA provided strategic guidance, PR advice, and advocacy training to Canadian organizations and activists. As in Australia, this support took an institutional form: in 1998, the Canadian Shooting Sports Association (CSSA) established its own mirror of the NRA-ILA, which it named the Canadian Institute for Legislative Action (CILA). The institute’s executive director, Tony Bernardo, openly stated that the NRA provided “tremendous amounts of logistical support” to CILA and “freely [gives] us anything” short of financial contributions.¹⁷⁸ The NRA has also sent a long line of advocates and strategists to rally support and provide advice in Canada. NRA political strategist Glen Caroline helped Canadian gun groups organize in the run-up to the 2006 federal election, and the then NRA president, Sandra Froman, participated in a town hall on overturning the country’s gun registry. This effort to help Canadian organizations paid significant dividends in 2012, when Canada’s conservative members of parliament voted to abolish the registry.¹⁷⁹

The NRA’s work extends beyond the English-speaking world, as shown by the organization’s involvement in Brazil’s battle over gun rights in the early 2000s. The country had one of the world’s highest per capita gun ownership rates, and firearms were widespread; so, too, was gun-related crime. As legislative debates over gun control raged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Brazilian gun rights activists and the NRA worked closely on strategy, messaging, and advocacy.¹⁸⁰ When the legislative dispute came to a head, NRA official Charles Cunningham visited Brazil in August 2003 to consult top activists and host public pro-gun rallies. Cunningham and the NRA encouraged Brazilian activists to adopt a rights-based framing in the gun debate, arguing that the activists should portray the issue as being about the right to defend oneself from crime and violence.

Brazilian activists translated many NRA materials word for word and circulated them in the National Congress and civil society.¹⁸¹ Although the activists lost the legislative debate in 2003, the NRA remained active—although to a lesser degree—in efforts to oppose the subsequent referendum on banning gun and ammunition sales. In a shock defeat for gun control advocates, the NRA-backed argument about rights won out: Brazilians rejected the ban proposed in the referendum by an overwhelming margin.¹⁸² Claiming victory, NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre noted that the victory stymied establishment civil society funders’ efforts to promote “civil disarmament” around the world.¹⁸³

CASE STUDY 2: BOLSTERING CONSERVATIVE LEGAL ADVOCACY

As major questions in American sociopolitical life have increasingly been pushed into the judicial sphere, conservative groups have invested heavily in a legal movement that seeks to limit governmental power, prioritize religious freedom, and counter what they perceive as judicial activism to create new

interpretations of rights. That legal movement has seen notable success not only in shaping the U.S. judiciary but also in drafting laws and litigating the way the laws are implemented. Lessons learned in the United States about how to use the law to address major sociopolitical questions are also shaping legal debates beyond American borders. Flush with resources and experience from decades of advocacy in U.S. courts and legislatures, American conservative legal groups have eagerly sought to strengthen the capacities of like-minded lawyers and legal movements abroad.

One of the leading groups in the transnational conservative legal movement is the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF). Founded in 1994, the ADF describes itself as “the world’s largest legal organization committed to protecting religious freedom, free speech, marriage and family, parental rights, and the sanctity of life.”¹⁸⁴ The group pursues these objectives through litigation, political advocacy, and training for lawyers. In 2010, the ADF launched a global arm, ADF International, to expand engagement on all three of these fronts abroad.

The ADF and ADF International support lawyers and legal movements abroad through two primary avenues. The first is training and information sharing. The ADF runs multiple programs aimed at developing the capacities of Christian lawyers, including its marquee Blackstone Legal Fellowship. The group claims that since 2000, it has trained 2,600 law students from more than thirty countries; its training programs emphasize legal philosophy and practice as well as hands-on experience through internship placements.¹⁸⁵ ADF International likewise runs capacity-building programs, including the Veritas Scholarship, which pays for promising lawyers from around the world to work directly with an ADF International advocacy team in Vienna or Geneva.¹⁸⁶

The ADF and ADF International also routinely host or co-host conferences to foster the exchange of ideas about law, faith, and values. Some of these events are aimed at global audiences, including ADF’s annual Summit on Religious Freedom, while others are directed toward specific regional or country contexts, like the 2017 Referendum for the Family: Analysis and Implications conference held in Bucharest, which sought to galvanize civil society support for a referendum to ban same-sex marriage in Romania.¹⁸⁷

The second avenue for supporting international lawyers and legal movements is by providing direct financial and strategic backing. The ADF runs a robust grants and funding program designed to pay for lawyers to take on key cases in countries around the world, advocate before governing bodies, arrange training programs, and publish legal analysis. According to openDemocracy, an independent media platform, the ADF has spent \$21 million since 2007 on international programming.¹⁸⁸ ADF staff have also provided direct legal advice and guidance to teams engaged in hot-button cases around the world, including over same-sex rights in Jamaica, free speech in Finland, and religious freedom in India.¹⁸⁹

Other U.S.-based conservative legal organizations, like the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), have taken a similar approach to capacity building and advocacy. Since its founding in 1987 by evangelical leader Pat Robertson, the ACLJ has gradually expanded its international operations, opening offices in France, Pakistan, Russia, and South Korea. The ACLJ expanded into Africa in the early 2010s, establishing locally run but largely U.S.-funded affiliates in Kenya (the East African Center for Law and Justice) and Zimbabwe (the African Center for Law and Justice).

The primary mission of these centers, as identified by Jason Sekulow, head of ACLJ operations in Africa, was to support each country's constitution-drafting process by mobilizing relevant civil society actors. In Zimbabwe, this was achieved primarily through providing legal training and research facilities to local lawyers.¹⁹⁰ This training helped these lawyers propose constitutional provisions to ban same-sex marriage and abortion. The group applied similar approaches in Kenya, although when a similar ban was taken out of the country's draft constitution, the East African Center for Law and Justice worked to help mobilize Christian civil society groups to vote against ratification.¹⁹¹ In both Kenya and Zimbabwe, the ACLJ's funding and capacity building strengthened the abilities of relevant constituencies to push for abortion and same-sex marriage to be outlawed in the countries' constitutions.

Both the ACLJ and the ADF have frequently been at odds with the U.S. government and major U.S. civil society supporters. For example, in Kenya, although U.S. officials stopped short of urging a "yes" vote in the 2010 referendum on a new constitution, they strongly backed Kenyan constitutional reform, while the ACLJ supported organizations that advocated a "no" vote. And in Zimbabwe, multiple American funders supported programming on LGBTQ rights and family planning, while the ACLJ backed groups that advocated strict constitutional restrictions on same-sex marriage and abortion.¹⁹² The ADF has also butted heads frequently with other civil society funders. In Belize, for example, the ADF advised and supported litigants seeking to uphold antisodomy laws, while major U.S. civil society supporters, like Heartland Alliance International and the Open Society Foundations, worked with the United Belize Advocacy Movement, the plaintiff seeking to overturn the ban.¹⁹³

CASE STUDY 3: FAITH-BASED GROUPS SUPPORTING PRO-LIFE CAUSES

Few issues have animated U.S. conservatives as much as abortion. In the nearly half-century since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade* that a constitutional right to privacy extends to a woman's decision to have an abortion, conservative faith-based groups have made countering abortion both at home and abroad a key objective. Support for pro-life civil society across the world has been a centerpiece of this effort.

Reflecting the transnational aspirations of the pro-life movement, many U.S. antiabortion organizations have been explicitly designed to strengthen and support pro-life activism abroad. Heartbeat International, a leading Christian antiabortion group based in Ohio, for example, adopted an international model shortly after its formation in 1971. Heartbeat's network is rooted in a growing global network of affiliates, which expanded from 200 partners in 1993 to 2,800 affiliates across sixty-eight countries in 2022.¹⁹⁴ Heartbeat provides partner antiabortion organizations across the world with training, advice, educational material, and strategic guidance. Perhaps its most important contribution to global antiabortion activism has been the export of the model of pregnancy resource centers, which offer counseling and seek to dissuade women from having abortions. Heartbeat provides significant knowledge and financial resources to partner organizations, including through a portal called Life Reach Global, which allows U.S. donors to directly contribute to international pro-life partners.¹⁹⁵

Other U.S.-based groups have been active in countering abortion and contraception as well. An antiabortion group founded in Texas, 40 Days for Life, has worked with activists in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and elsewhere to implement its model of forty-day prayer vigils as protests outside abortion clinics.¹⁹⁶ And Human Life International (HLI), a Virginia-based Catholic group that is active in one hundred countries around the world, provides partners with educational resources, training, and financial support. It has also connected U.S. lawyers with Latin American advocates in an effort to “educate and fight politically against anti-life laws and in favor of pro-life laws,” according to Adolfo Castañeda, HLI’s education director for Hispanic outreach.¹⁹⁷

As with LGBTQ issues, global debates on abortion rights have pitted conservative organizations against establishment U.S. civil society supporters. Although the U.S. government’s funding of organizations that provide or promote abortion has been notoriously inconsistent, groups like Heartbeat and HLI have repeatedly funded causes directly opposed to those supported by establishment funders, including the U.S. government. In El Salvador, for example, HLI has funneled resources for decades to *Sí a la Vida* (Yes to Life), the country’s main pro-life organization; in a 2001 article, the president of HLI claimed that *Sí a la Vida*’s victory in enshrining an abortion ban in the Salvadoran constitution showed how U.S. organizations could successfully export pro-life activism.¹⁹⁸ In contrast, organizations like the U.S.-based Center for Reproductive Rights have been seeking to mobilize civil society opposition to the country’s strict ban.¹⁹⁹

CONCLUSION

Although U.S. support for civil society abroad is often framed as supporting a liberal set of values, the flows of conservative civil society aid identified in this chapter run counter to this view. Instead, the clash over values that is shaping global—and U.S.—politics is increasingly impacting the ways in which civil society organizations support one another, often in ways that cut across geopolitical fault lines.

The findings of this chapter point to a basic truth: civil society groups in countries around the world are more likely to solicit and receive support from groups that are ideologically aligned with their values and objectives than from those that are not, regardless of their host country’s geopolitical alignment. In many cases, this may mean building partnerships with mainstream organizations like large foundations or the U.S. government, which advance or are perceived to advance a liberal set of values. But in many other cases, groups may seek support from organizations that align more closely with their own views on a given issue, including conservative groups.

As a result, civil society aid from the United States frequently flows to organizations on both sides of an issue. Such aid also often flows to groups in countries with strained relations with the United States, including places like El Salvador, Russia, and Zimbabwe. Across cases, the transnational nature of the values struggle appears to supersede geopolitical considerations. Conservative civil society actors, in other words, tend to view themselves not as geopolitical actors but as universal ones.

American conservative groups frame their civil society support initiatives as both proactive and reactive.

They are proactive in the sense that they seek to strengthen actors who will advance a shared set of values and policy preferences and thereby have a greater ability to make an effective case in public debate. Yet, they are reactive in the sense that they respond to mainstream civil society support agendas, which many conservative groups view as skewing toward liberal causes. The combination of proactive advancement of values and reaction to establishment civil society support has been a key dynamic in the growing effort to counteract liberal civil society support agendas.

The increased resources and organizational capacities of groups on both sides of a divisive issue can also exacerbate political fissures domestically. In El Salvador, the civil society support flowing from the United States to pro- and antiabortion groups has continued to inflame political divisions, even decades after the country's ban was put in place. And in courtrooms from Belize to Kenya, lawyers on both sides of highly contentious cases on issues like same-sex marriage often receive support from U.S. organizations. The result is that political polarization, rooted in seemingly intractable disputes over values, can become an incidental export of competing aid flows.

Civil society support, then, reflects the vast range of views held by Americans and American organizations. Far from being monolithically liberal, civil society support flows from the United States to organizations that represent a wide range of values systems. And as the contest of values systems continues to divide global politics, ideologically diverse civil society aid flows underscore the degree to which those divides are playing out within democracies—and how those divides might shape both governmental and nongovernmental engagement with civil society abroad in years to come.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

- 1 This chapter was made possible by helpful discussions with Ke-hsien Huang, Kuei-min Chang, and Yining Liu as well as comments from members of the Carnegie Civic Research Network.
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CHAPTER 6

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