EUROPEANISATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY THROUGH THE SPONSORED EUROPEAN PUBLICS

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Abstract

The EU institutions, particularly the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee, have encouraged and sponsored the emergence of non-governmental organisations in Brussels. This strategy has been aimed at mobilising the interests of social actors toward the EU and at helping to reduce the EU's perceived communication deficit. This article first suggests that, when put into practice, this strategy has rather reinforced Europeanisation of social actors. Europeanisation within civil society has been rendered as legitimisation of the European political project and of particular modes of governance. Then, the article proposes an alternative NGO networking model, which stresses the civilising impacts of public spheres instead of the proximity of civil society with political power.

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Introduction

From a normative perspective, European NGOs (EU NGOs) role as agents of democratisation has been explained with their potential to function like a transmission belt of European civil society (i.e. establishing a link between grassroots influence and political power) and to generate a critical rationality (Eriksen 2001; De Schutter 2002; Magnette 2003; Steffek et al. 2007).[1] In this view, EU NGOs contribute to democratisation of EU governance by creating publicity about the EU and by carrying the lifeworld experiences of civil society, along with the public interests, to EU policy-making processes. The proponents of this view, though, have ignored the impacts of the top-down processes by assuming that the discursive interactions within NGO networking necessarily flow from the local to the supranational (Curtin 1999; De Schutter 2002; Magnette 2003; Steffek et al. 2007). Accordingly, they have relied on the fact that EU NGOs necessarily possess the means to detect and link public deliberations to European policy-making processes.

The EU's current strategies in regard to civil society can rather be conceived in terms of the legacy of the EU's political project, which suggests creating Europeanised elites whose interests are directed towards the EU. Europeanisation of the EU NGOs and their Europeanising impacts have been addressed in three different ways. First, from a normative perspective, Europeanisation has been conceived as being akin to political socialisation and social constituency building (Warleigh 2001; see also Brüggeman 2005; Fossum and Trenz 2006). Second, it has been argued that EU NGOs have an ambition to implant a European dimension to the NGO community (Sánchez-Salgado 2007). Third, the role of the EU institutions in the making of a European civil society has been addressed with the notion of "participatory engineering" (Zittel and Fuchs 2007; Sauregger 2010). With empirical evidence, this article contributes to these studies which have grasped the top-down processes in the constitution of civil society. Yet, it contradicts the notion of Europeanisation of civil society from above, and in this respect, it conceives Europeanisation of civil society as a detriment to the democratising promises of civil society. In contrast to the argument that defines the main problem of the EU NGOs' work with respect to their disconnection from the grassroots, this article rather points out their Europeanisation as the main problem.

This problem was predicted by Armstrong (2002, 115) who defined Europeanisation of civil society as "processes by which the civil society actors organise in larger, transnational structures not merely to act as a vehicle for national members, but in order to give an authoritatively, representative European voice" (cf. Sánchez-Salgado 2007). Yet, he also addressed another problem related to the work of the EU NGOs, namely that this networking structure would also be hindered by the autonomisation of the Brussels headquarters, resulting in Europeanisation of civil society from above. Armstrong (2002, 115) then argued that in the case of lack of communication and connections between the supranational headquarters and the grassroots, EU NGOs would "develop their strategies independently from the direct control of their members." This article suggests that the activities of the Platform during the 2000s have proved Armstrong's predictions about the processes of Europeanisation and autonomisation, as these concepts were defined by him.

EU institutions have taken on the role of legitimising the presence of these organisations in Brussels, and their contribution to European public policy-making,

by devising norms about their representativeness, accountability, and inclusiveness. Having concentrated on the EU NGOs' work in Brussels, however, this strategy avoids the attention from the impacts of the EU and of these organisations on the organised actors of civil society (CES 851/99, 1999). In turn, to legitimise the engagement of EU NGOs in European governance, the EU has focused on developing formal and procedural rules, including enacting a code of conduct (COM 2002, 704 final) defining criteria for representation and inclusiveness (CES 240/2006, 2006). Nonetheless, due to the process of Europeanisation of civil society, these initiatives would not necessarily help to correct the shortcomings of the EU NGOs' work. In contrast to this formalist and pragmatist perspective, I would rather suggest that the central premises of civil society – in promoting public deliberation, identity-formation and linking public concerns through public spheres – should be sought beyond the proximity of civil society, with the political authorities. In this sense, I will elaborate, at the end, a cognitive model through which particular interests would be transformed into common interests within NGO networking. This model suggests that interactions among NGOs would have civilising impacts when these interactions are not dominated by the political authorities.

The research was conducted within the scope of the EUROSPHERE project,[2] and was based on a methodology of document analysis, reports, leaflets, brochures and newsletters, along with a total of six interviews with the secretariat and members of the Social Platform, one of the prominent EU NGO networks. The documents examined in this article cover the period of the 2000s. The interviews were conducted by the author during 2009.

I will first address the issue of the Commission's active role in the emergence of the Social Platform and discuss the debate over the NGOs' funding by the EU. Then, I will elaborate on how the Social Platform engaged in Europeanisation of civil society during the 2000s, by drawing on empirical evidence about its activities during the 2000s related to the milestone events of the European integration. Finally, I will represent an alternative model for NGO networking, which can function as a public sphere of civil society (cf. Calhoun 1993, 2005; Dryzek 1999).

The Social Platform of European NGOs as a Sponsored European Public

The Social Platform of European NGOs, the network of NGO networks, is a prominent social actor which is officially recognised by the Commission as a partner in social policy. It was established during the 1990s, following the Green Paper on European Social Policy (COM 1993, 551 final), which aimed to initiate structured communication channels between the EU NGOs[3] working in the field of social policy and EU institutions. What makes the Platform significant for this article is that it was established by the Commission in 1995 to help the Commission to play an intermediary role between the Commission and the social NGO networks (Cram 2006; Greenwood 2007a). I will, in the following sections, elaborate upon how, and on which issues, the Platform has fulfilled its task. Cullen (2005, 72) stresses that "the Platform marked the first attempt to gather a group of NGOs characterised by diverse organisational cultures, sectoral interests and ideological orientations within such a collaborative context."[4] I will, however, take issue with the argument that this networking infrastructure has been built by the Platform in order to connect European citizenry with European governance.

The Platform claims that it is set up to articulate the interests of European civil society with the European political structures by gathering transnational networks of European NGOs. In the paper, this networking mechanism is well-interconnected among different sectors and between different levels – including the national and the European. For an initial observer, this structure could be considered a well-functioning network, in which the different levels of civil society communicate with each other, and, in turn, that deliberations begun within this structure *necessarily* link to the political public spheres. Yet, this networking structure is prone to being moulded by the EU institutions.

In this respect, the sponsorship and financial support of the EU can be conceived as one of the most controversial issues hindering the independence of civil society. The survival of EU NGOs, by and large, is dependent on EU funding and on producing certain outputs as a requirement of their contractual obligations. The central challenge for the EU NGOs, then, is to find a balance between complying with their financiers' demands and defending the interests of their constituencies. Despite the fact that opportunities for funding and consultations are open to all procedurally, in reality access to EU money and entitlement to partner status are necessarily restricted only to some NGOs –considering that funding resources are limited and the consultation mechanism has a confined capacity to handle inputs. The nature of the EU's strategies regarding civil society encourages a competition among the NGOs for funding and entitlement, thus creating an infrastructure for institutional Darwinism within the NGO community. For instance, the Platform has been advocating using a system of accreditation that could confer a status that would enable some of the NGOs to formally interact with the EU institutions. Despite the fact that the Platform has presented this proposal as a means of securing structured relations between the EU institutions and civil society, in fact, with this proposal, the Platform excludes the possibility of involvement of further actors that would threaten the privileged positions of the NGOs settled within the institutional EU framework, including its own position as a interlocutor of the EU.

Yet, in contrast to the critiques of EU funding, some defend EU support by comparing it with the state's financial support for political parties (Fazi and Smith 2006; see also Salgado 2007). In this view, funding EU NGOs is particularly appealing to European governance in a context wherein a European public cannot be built on the basis of a common identity or a common public sphere. For instance, the Social Platform is funded by the EU, under the grant programme of the *Community Action Programme to Promote Active European Citizenship*. Furthermore, in arguing that democracy should not wait for spontaneous emergence of critical publics, the defenders of the EU funding suggest that the EU should mobilise civil society by financially supporting the civic organisations and by formally incorporating them into the decision-making structures (cf. Cohen and Sabel 1997).[5] This strategy, in turn, presumes creating a "critical gaze" around the bureaucratic administration, while reinforcing efficient and effective problem-solving governance (Bohman 2010) by focusing on the Platform's activities. Yet, in the following discussion, I will show how the supporters of EU funding have failed in this regard, and how Armstrong's aforementioned admonition concerning the Europeanisation of the EU NGOs has turned into reality.

Europeanisation of Civil Society

The Turin Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) summit in 1996 diagnosed the legitimacy crisis of EU governance due to a lack of citizens' interest. Since then, the motto of bridging the gap with the citizens has been recognised as the norm by the EU institutions (Kochler-Koch and Finke 2007). Accordingly, the *White Paper on Governance* (WPG) (COM 2001, 428 final) suggested overcoming this gap by relating its proposals about governance reforms to a re-conceptualisation of democracy. This new type of democracy would integrate social groups into decision-making processes and implementation of policies, thus linking citizens' interests to governance. On these grounds, in the early 2000s, the Commission gave a specific emphasis to incorporating EU NGOs into EU governance. The Commission's ex-president, Romano Prodi, articulated the role of the ECS in (new) Europe as follows: "It is time to realise that Europe is not just run by European institutions but by national, regional and local authorities too – and by civil society" (Social Platform 2004). The Platform, on behalf of its members, affirmed Prodi's call, and volunteered for this task of democratising EU governance:

> *NGOs stimulate democratic renewal by providing a channel for citizens to engage in dialogue with policymakers […]. We believe that creating this kind of ongoing dialogue with politicians and policy-makers will help bring about a European Union which is more in touch with its citizens, and is more focused on improving their lives* (Social Platform 2005).

During the early 2000s, in describing its own activity, the Platform claimed that it was "an important way of helping bridge the gap between citizens and the EU institutions and therefore reflecting the views of citizens" (ibid.). The president of the Platform, Conny Reuter, explains the role of the Platform in this process):

> *We must defend the interests of all our member organisations; on the other hand, we must connect to citizens [to advance the interests of the EU]. The most important challenge is to understand that this kind of lobby, what we are doing, is not only for one or two topics. We have connected with the citizens and given them the idea that through us they are involved in EU politics, so that they participate* (personal communication, May 2009).

In turn, the Platform took part in three important incidents concerning European integration during the 2000s: the governance reform, drafting of a Constitution for Europe (2002-2004) and Enlargement (2002-2004). Yet, in these events, the Platform proved to have been acting more like the interlocutor of the EU and the EU NGOs, than as a mechanism linking the voice of the citizenry (cf. Cram 2006).

White Paper on Governance

The *White Paper on Governance* (*WPG*) was a key Commission initiative for administrative reform of EU governance. Despite the Parliament's critical stance toward civil society's engagement in the decision-making process due to their accountability and representation problems, the *WPG* defined civil society as the constituents and stakeholders of governance. The Platform launched the Future of Europe initiative in 2001, which "in a way marked the broadening of the Governance debate" (Social Platform 2001). The Platform "broadened the debate" over governance by circulating its position paper, *Democracy, Governance and European*

NGOs [published in 1999], by participating in the hearings held by the Commission before the launch of the Paper and by organising meetings, speaking at numerous conferences, and writing articles on this issue (Social Platform 2001).

Following the *WPG*, the Platform concentrated on putting into practice the imperatives of the *WPG*, suggesting a new understanding about the relationship between political power and civil society:

> *The Platform will make proposals to the Commission regarding the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission's 2001 White Paper on Governance, which proposes more structured and consistent forms of consultation with society, including the establishment of "partnership agreements" with NGOs in certain sectoral areas* (Social Platform 2003).

The Platform declared its willingness to participate in new power configurations, emphasising that it was capable of fulfilling its roles in that "it plays a leading role in bringing together the various European NGO sectors" (Social Platform 2001). The Platform tried to secure a legal basis for consultations in this regard: "A legal basis for civil dialogue between decision-makers and NGOs is crucial in building a socially just Europe that is able and willing to take the needs of all into account. Promoting this view has been one of the spear points in the Platform's work" (Social Platform 2001). This position has not been altered during the 2000s.

Convention on the Future of Europe, Constitution Turn and the Platform

Against this backdrop, *the Convention on the Future of Europe* was set in 2001 by the European Council, which prepared the *Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe* in 2003. The Convention concerned EU NGOs in the sense that they were included in the discussions; some scholars also considered this as a democratising promise (De Schutter 2002; Magnette 2003). Yet, one of the vice presidents of the Convention, Guliano Amato, emphasised the importance of the "support of civil society in legitimising the final outcome of the Convention's work" (*The Economist* 2004). During the Convention period the Social Platform played an important role in reinforcing a debate about the constitution and the necessity of the constitution within the NGO community. It mobilised the largest NGO networks working in the fields of human rights, environment, and development in order to take part in the debate. With respect to this, during the early 2000s, the Platform initiated several campaigns to promote the debate over the *Future of Europe*. These campaigns, such as the Citizens' Assembly and act4Europe, aimed at mobilising the NGO community for the EU-related issues. Fostering political debate is conceived as a requirement for democratisation (Habermas 1996). Yet, during these campaigns, what was observed was that supranational intermediaries of civil society rather worked for transmitting the political message to the peripheries, instead of carrying the local voices into the constitution-making processes.

For instance, the *Citizens' Assembly* project was introduced within the context of the Future of Europe initiative. It was held in Brussels in December 2001 and continued until 2004. The Platform claimed that the Citizens' Assembly mobilised over 700 NGO delegates, government representatives and members of civil society from all over Europe (Social Platform 2000). It focused on different topics related to the future of Europe, including globalisation, migration, the eradication of poverty, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the European Constitution (ibid.). In

2001, many of the participating NGOs joined in drafting the declaration, "Europe is our Future." This declaration suggested extending EU authority in several areas:

> *We call for the extension of authority of the European Union in the fields of employment, poverty, social exclusion, equality between men and women, sustainable development, services of general interest, food safety, cultural diversity and the fight against discrimination in order to guarantee an upward convergence of policies and national legislation, notably from the point of view of fundamental rights* (Social Platform 2002).

Furthermore, under the leadership of the Social Platform, a group of NGO network coalitions formed the Civil Society Contact Group (CSCG),[6] which initiated the act4europe campaign – that is, the Convention's work – aimed at mobilising the national level NGOs.[7] The Platform declared the objectives of the *act4europe* project as follows: "Citizens have grown dangerously disillusioned with the European project. The Convention on the Future of Europe is thus a vital opportunity to reverse this trend" (Social Platform 2002). With respect to this, act4europe published a toolkit for NGOs in order to inform them about the ongoing debate on the *Future of Europe* and activate them for participating in it.[8] The Campaign's second toolkit about the work of the Convention was distributed at the *Social Policy Forum* in 2002, the forum that brings together the European social NGO networks and the Commission.

The Platform also took an active role in the constitution ratification process. It tried "to facilitate the engagement of social NGOs at national level to engage with the debates around the ratification of the Treaty" (Social Platform 2005, 17). In this respect, it provided legal expertise and analysis about the constitution and prepared a toolkit for NGOs together with the Civil Society Contact Group (CSCG), a coalition of European NGO networks. Furthermore, it organised a conference on the constitution with the Contact Group and a seminar for Platform members on activating NGOs in ratification debates. For the concern of the NGOs, the *Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe* contained an article about "participatory democracy." Despite the fact that the *Draft Constitution* was not ratified, the article on participatory democracy would then be enshrined in the *Reform Treaty* without any change and be constitutionalised with the ratification of the Treaty.[9]

Enlargement and Network Visits

As has been stated, the governance turn promoted by the Commission involves incorporating citizens' associations into public policy-making and administration processes (Jachtenfuchs 2001, Kochler-Koch and Rittberger 2006). This objective required training of those associations that would engage in governance processes – at both EU and local levels – so that they would be capable of managing the complex requirements of public bureaucracy, including that of their own organisations. The Platform took on a trainer task, while conveying the knowledge of EU governance to the NGO community. The trainer task of the Platform can be seen as an attempt to Europeanise the *third sector* from above and with the supranational intermediaries of civil society. To illustrate, it initiated several conferences and seminars to circulate the imperatives of new modes of governance among its members, to inform them about the existence of these policies and to train them for the new era. During the 2000s, the Platform had a special focus on NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe,

organising the following network visits to new member states: Poland (2002), the Czech Republic (2003), Cyprus (2004), Hungary (2004) and Latvia (2004). It organised conferences and seminars to train NGOs in these countries in terms of political advocacy, fundraising, communication techniques and skills, and NGO management. It published toolkits about state-NGO relations, such as "Civil dialogue in the candidate countries: Building bridges across a wider Europe" (Social Platform 2002). In sum, the Platform's training activities can be conceived, on the one hand, as attempts to reinforce the legitimacy of the EU within the new member states; and, on the other, as strategies to foster an ideal collective action model that enables NGOs to talk in a peaceful and constructive manner with power holders. To reiterate, this model was averred by the Platform during the Convention on the European constitution campaigns.

Discontents with Europeanisation of Civil Society

The Platform assessed the Citizen's Assembly as follows:

> *[This] was the first time such a broad coalition of organisations had united to organise an event of this nature, showing that civil society is ready to talk with leaders in a peaceful and constructive manner ... The organisation of the "Citizens' Assembly" in Brussels, December 2001, demonstrated the Platform's ability to mobilise European civil society organisations, and to provide an effective, peaceful and high-profile civil society presence at EU Summits* (Social Platform 2002).

The Platform's own perceptions about the Citizens' Assembly project, combined with its work during the 2000s, can help us draw five conclusions:

First, the Platform revealed that it was, itself, along with the other EU NGOs, the right agent and partner in the process of European political restructuring. NGOs presented their consent and willingness to be agents in this process; thus, they declared that they were ready for formalised deliberations with the political power. In the meantime, they carefully drew a line between themselves and the protesting and deliberating actors of civil society, and thus, in a way, confirmed that they would not challenge the new constellation. The Platform, then, perpetuated the idea of engagement of social actors in deliberative settings, while discarding from collective action the protest as a modus operandi. In other words, the Platform and the EU NGO networks seemed to have had high hopes about the practice of being involved in the deliberative settings. As Young (2001) points out, however, empirical studies on deliberative arrangements showed that those settings are prone to be dominated by the white male power elites and by hegemonic discourse. Given this, Young (ibid.) continues, stating that protest is preferred by social actors as a more effective way of political communication in raising the awareness of the public and the political authorities.

The second conclusion of the Citizen's Assembly is that the Platform and other EU NGOs alike were willing to further the European political project, revealing zeal for the idea of deepening European integration. The interviews conducted within the scope of Eurosphere research also confirmed continuation of these thoughts. In other words, the Platform and the EU NGO community alike have acted like pan-European intellectuals who had shifted their interests to the EU, while striving for

the European cause. The founding fathers of the European project have predicted transformation of the private or instrumental interests of the actors towards the EU. Yet, the Europeanisation of civil society extends beyond this anticipation by gaining the consent of social actors in striving for the European project. Practised in this way, Europeanisation of civil society has resulted in the usage of the sponsored EU NGOs as the interlocutors or brokers of the EU. This practice undermines the presumed role of the EU NGOs in creating alternative projects or in carrying the subaltern projects to European level.

Fourth, the kind of participation that the Platform advocates has an uneasy relationship with normative democracy. This functional interpretation of democracy has been found problematic, as it neglects the institutions of representative democracy and forming collective will processes. This view assumes that citizens are represented by the NGO networks just as the Platform per se. However, as a critique of this, it is argued that having participated in "civil dialogue," the Platform helped in advancing the Commission's institutional power and its consultation regime (e.g. Cram 2006; Smismans 2007), as well as in legitimising the Commission's rule in the respective policy fields (Cram 2006).

Fifth, despite the Platform's aspirations, the Commission has not been willing to formalise its relations with the Platform. These relations have rather been set up in a somewhat nebulous way (i.e. through biannual meetings and Internet consultations, especially during pre-policy formulation processes), so that the Platform's engagement in formal decision-making processes has been kept at a minimum level (Fazi and Smith 2006). In the meantime, multi-stakeholder forums, which were presented in the *WPG* as an indicator of partnership governance, were not commonly implemented. The Platform participated in only one forum in which it formally enjoyed stakeholder status; that was the "Multi-Stakeholder Forum" between 2002 and 2004, which dealt with Corporate Social Responsibility, a policy initiative published by the Commission in 2002. Other stakeholders in this initiative were business representatives, such as Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederations of Europe (UNICE), the European Roundtable of Industrialists and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) (Social Platform 2002, 2003 and 2004).

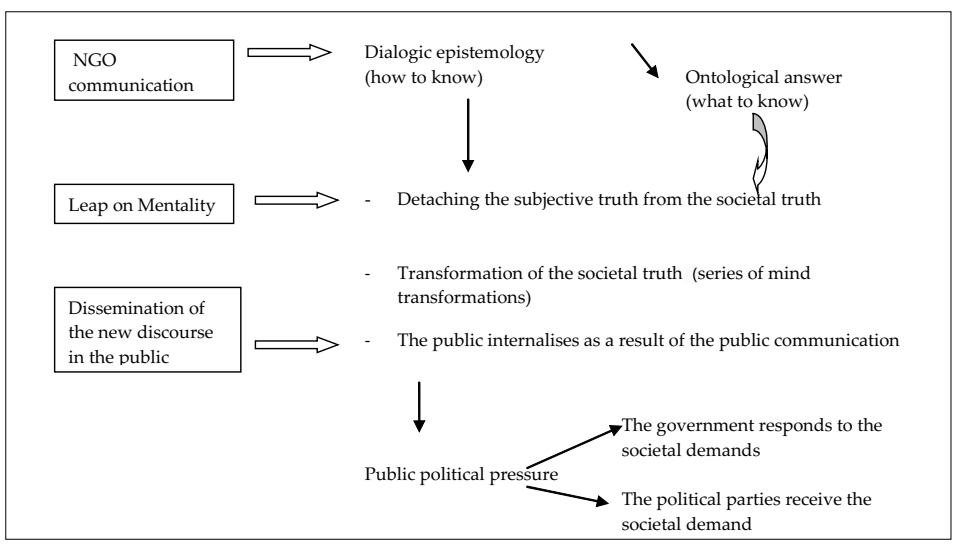
Alternative Model to Europeanisation of NGOs: Civilising Impacts of the Networks

I have, up to now, shown the repercussions of the European of civil society from above by the supranational intermediaries. In this section, I will advance a cognitive model through which particular interests would be transformed into common interests through NGO networking. This model suggests that interactions among the NGOs would have civilising impacts by visualising and de-constructing and re-constructing the norms which are not implanted by the political authorities. For a start, the national NGOs of two different countries, working for the same section of society, for example, immigrants, face different issues due to different public measures in each country. Communication among immigrant NGOs fosters "sharing" and "learning" among them. The NGOs coming from different conditions would deliberate over the differing situations in each national social space. As we have learnt from the literature on deliberative democracy, the communicative interactions would trigger a process of identity transformation (cf. Calhoun 1993;

Habermas 1996; Shifkin 2009). The deliberations would also bring a leap in mentality by transforming the established norms, which have been taken for granted. From a constructivist view inspired by Foucault, the mind is, by and large, contingent on external impetus, and it is inclined to internalise "what exists" as the normal. Unless interacting with "other" norms – for example, in some other society – or initiating a critical attitude that questions the domestic norms (i.e. regarding why they have become the normal, and whether it is possible to imagine different norms) the mind would not problematise the philosophical question of "what can be known" above and beyond the existing. Hence, communication acts like a medium in answering the ontological question of "what can be known." Or, dialogic interaction can be thought of as an epistemological method, thus enlarging the horizon of the mind, as Arendt (1992) would call it. In other words, epistemology finds an answer to the ontological question, and the communicative interactions trigger processes which problematise the "normal." In this process, the normal of the self is detached from the normal of society, due to interactions among the discourses. Hence the self realises that what it used to know, that what belonged to itself as "subjective truth" was, in fact, a reflection of "societal truth." The mind then establishes its "subjective equilibrium" beyond the "societal equilibrium" of the national.

To illustrate, in the example of communication among immigrant NGO networks, the NGOs stationed in places with worse conditions would start to mobilise the public and the national governments to upgrade immigrant policies, since they have learned "what is to be done" and more importantly, that it is already done in their networking. Thereby, whether a discourse on better rights for immigrants can circulate in different national publics depends on the success of NGOs to carry this out in European space. NGOs in this model have an aim to raise the awareness of the public, which in turn is expected to put pressure on the public policies. The media would also continue mobilising the public around the issue; while some political parties would be grasping the concern as per societal demand.

Figure 1: From Communication beyond Nation State to the Publicising at the General Public



This portrayal also entails the argument that EU NGOs could link the public's concerns to the "public authorities" and to the "public itself." For instance, an NGO can contribute to the process of internalising the rights of persons with disabilities as a norm so that public space is modified in their favour. To start with, NGOs would contribute to making the discourse on disability rights visible. As a result, when someone sees, for example, that a lift in the metro or a path in the streets has been constructed for the disabled, that person would not question why it was placed there, but would consider it "normal." Furthermore, rendering the discourse of disability rights visible would foster empathy, so that when one sees an obstacle for the disabled, one would problematise the situation, even if it would not be directly in one's rational interest. Given these illustrations, EU NGO communication creates an infrastructure of communication which enables the circulation norms among different societies. Even though improving disability rights could be thought of as a universal norm, what is evident is that the extent to which persons with disabilities participate in social life is different in each society. The same issue-oriented NGOs can discuss "what more could be done," while developing further "empathy" for other issues. As Arendt (1992) would say, the "enlarged mentality" could emerge from their communication. For instance, the discourse of the excluded is in itself important, as it produces the experience of how one might feel when excluded. In this way, EU NGOs can transform a private interest into a common public interest, first, by informing, and then, by targeting the consciousness of the people.

This process depicts how deliberative participation can illustrate dialogical norm reproduction beyond the nation state. EU NGOs can play a crucial role, as outlined above, if they are not dominated by the sovereign power and the mentality of the market. They could act as the "conscience of the society," mobilising it against unjust decisions. According to the illustrations given here, the impact of NGO communication on norm shifting can also be extended to wider areas and to other issues NGOs are dealing with. The criteria for the success of NGOs, thereby, rely on their capability to present the private issues as universal claims and as the common interest of the public. The "public interest" and common issues have so far been defined within the national space. As more issues are getting global concern, the challenge is to extend the common interest and discuss "the fate of the public" beyond the national territories (Splichal 2011). Illustrated in this way, the visualisation of the issues and norm deconstruction would foster a civilising function, as Linklater (2007) would define it. In Kantian terms, on the other hand, this elucidates discursive construction of morality – as opposed to intuitive reasoning – from within intersubjective communication. The discourse is translated to decision-making processes through the public spheres.

Concluding Remarks

NGOs have been criticised in terms of lacking accountability, representativeness and inclusiveness. This article, however, addresses, as the major problem hindering the democratising promise of collective action, the Europeanisation of civil society, which amounts to a process in which social actors strive for dispersing the objectives devised by the political actors. In this view, the supranational centre dominates the communicative interactions within the network, while engaging in transmitting political messages to its local constituencies. The Social Platform, examined in this

article, has been sponsored to link the voice of European citizenry, while helping to reduce the communication gap between the EU and its citizens. Yet, as with the EU NGOs, it has proved to work in a way to legitimise the EU institutions, particularly the Commission. Further, it has been observed that politically imposed and guided agendas and the asymmetrical power positions within the network undermine the promise of the networking. One of the repercussions of the Platform's work is that it attempts to draw the boundaries of the legitimate European civil society with those actors which prefer to engage in governance settings without contention, thus categorically excluding contentious civil society from the conceptualisation of European civil society. Against this backdrop, the promise of NGO networking can rather be sought beyond the proximity of civil society with the political power and in terms of the relation of this networking to its civilising impacts, as well as to the notions of publicity, and public use of reason. NGO networking builds a potential communicative infrastructure having the premise of fostering social learning and of civic empathy. By following Habermas (1996) then, I rather suggest civil society should avoid involving in corporatist-like settings, in that rationalities of the bureaucracy and the market could dominate over the rationalities of civil society.

Notes:

1. EU NGOs have also been examined from the perspective of social movements (cf. Keck and Skink 1998; Imig and Tarrow 2001; Ruzza 2004; Balme and Chabanet 2008; Della Porta and Caiani 2009). Although in this article I take issue with the normative arguments on the EU NGOs, the climax of the debate carried out here, the repercussions of the top-down processes also challenge the social movements' stress on the self-organising of collective action and contention. For a review of the debate surrounding the European interest intermediation see also Greenwood (2007a).

2. For further information about the Eurosphere project see <http:// www.eurospheres.org/>.

3. It is necessary to make clear to what the phenomenon of EU NGO refers. The following list demonstrates five different channels through which the NGOs are institutionalised at EU level: (1) the national organisations representations' in Brussels, i.e. the Italian environmental organisation Legambiente that has had a branch in Brussels since 1999 (Fazi and Smith 2006); (2) the permanent offices of the international organisations in Brussels (Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Oxfam); (3) the Brussels based European NGO umbrella networks or platforms which appeared during 1990s with the financial support of the EU, such as the European Network Against Racism and the European Women's Lobby; (4) the second-level umbrella organisations of the networks of European NGOs (i.e. the Social Platform, Green 8, Human Rights Development Network, development NGOs' alliance of the CONCORD, consumer groups' platform of the BEUC, and the cultural groups' platform of the EFAH); and (5) the Civil Society Contact Group, established with the participation of the *category four*, with an aim to represent the EU NGO community, specifically in promoting the "participatory democracy" at EU level (ibid.).

4. The members of the Platform claim to represent thousands of organisations, associations and voluntary groups at local, regional and national level, including organisations of women, older people, people with disabilities, the unemployed, people affected by poverty, gays and lesbians, young people, children and families, and those organisations campaigning on issues such as social justice, homelessness, health and reproductive rights and racism.

5. Involving the NGOs in public policy-making processes finds its origins in the associative democracy (Hirst 1994; Cohen and Roger 1995; see also Baccaro 2006).

6. The CSCG started as a loose network, with its organisational work and management initially handled by the Platform. For instance, the Platform hosted and co-funded its coordinator person.

7. See the Social Platform (2003, 22).

8. This toolkit was downloaded 5000 times in ten days after it was published.

9. This article, *article 11* of Lisbon Treaty, involves not only the involvement of "civil society" in EU decision-making processes, but also allow the citizens submitting any legal proposal, with no fewer than one million signatures.

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