Bringing Civil Society In? Civil Society Dialogue and the EU’s Enlargement Strategy

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In the context of European Union governance, the civil dialogue refers to a wide range of formal and informal interactions (communication, consultation and deliberation) between civil society organisations and European Union (EU) institutions. The concept has traditionally featured in the EU’s input democracy discourse in the form of enhanced consultation with relevant stakeholders, as a response to a perceived democratic deficit and the need to involve citizens and the public interest. After the demise of the Constitutional Treaty the concept of civil society dialogue seemed to disappear from the EU discourses on interest groups/civil society organisations to be replaced by debates on transparency and accountability that have characterised the consultation around the European Transparency Initiative or the need to address the public sphere deficit through better communication and dialogue with the citizens of Europe. Yet, the concept of civil society dialogue has not disappeared but simply migrated to (perhaps) an unlikely territory, that of the EU’s enlargement agenda. Thus in its 2005 *Communication on Civil Society Dialogue Between the EU and Candidate Countries* the European Commission uses the concept of civil society dialogue to refer to ‘a strong, deep and sustained dialogue between the societies of the candidate countries and in the EU member States, as well as with the EU institutions’ (European Commission 2005a:2). The main objective of the civil society dialogue to be developed initially with Turkey and Croatia (in 2006 it was expanded to all countries in the Western Balkans) is to bring people together and better inform public opinions from the EU and candidate countries, by addressing the opportunities as well as the challenges posed by future enlargement. The engineering of this transnational dialogue

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1 In the context of enlargement, civil society is defined as to include all possible intermediary actors such as ‘the labour-market actors, i.e. the social partners (trade unions and employers federations); organisations representing social and economic players at large (consumer organisations for instance.); non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations, i.e. organisations at grassroots level through which citizens participate in local and municipal life (e.g. youth or family associations); religious communities and media’. all society structures outside of government and public administration, local communities and municipalities, the education, media and culture sectors and opinion leaders from national and European institutions. (European Commission 2005a:4).

2 After the accession of twelve new member states between 2004 and 2007, the European Union’s enlargement process continues. There are three candidate countries (that is to say their application to EU membership has been accepted), Croatia, Turkey and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). Accession negotiations with the first two started on 3 October 2005. Accession negotiations with FYROM have not started yet. Potential candidate countries (that is countries that enjoy an enhanced bilateral cooperation with the EU and that may apply for membership) include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo under UNSC Resolution 1244/99. The empirical evidence used in the paper to illustrate the implementation of the civil dialogue refers to the three candidate countries.
is explained as a reaction to the lessons learnt from the enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe. The EU recognises that the citizens in the EU member states and in the candidate countries were not sufficiently informed or prepared which allowed for the spreading of misconceptions and the negative politicisation of the process amongst the European publics. Hence, a wider EU strategy is required, the European Commission argues, to address the negative politicisation of integration. The guiding normative principle is that citizens, empowered by participation and dialogue through the creation of a transnational European deliberative public sphere will become supportive of enlargement. Hence, there is an obvious discursive turn in the use of the concept civil society dialogue from a consultation with stakeholders at an early stage of the policy process -as it has traditionally featured in the EU’s institutional discourse on civil society- to an ambitious tool expected to strengthen civil society development in the candidate countries, prepare citizens in both the EU and the candidate countries for future accession and crucially create some kind of transnational public sphere.

This logic resonates very clearly with the new European Union’s communication strategy designed after the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by popular votes and the reflection period that followed. With the motto ‘listening better’, ‘explaining better’ and ‘going local’ (European Commission 2008c) this new strategy for democracy, dialogue and debate was to reinvigorate European democracy and help the emergence of a European public sphere, where citizens are given the information and the tools to actively participate in the decision making process and gain ownership of the European project (European Commission 2005c). Hence in view of the 2005 Communication aspirations, it would be possible to develop an analysis of the EU’s civil society dialogue with the candidate countries along the lines of the EU’s attempt to engineer a transnational public sphere with the aim to legitimate enlargement both in the EU and in the candidate and the Western Balkans. However, a closer look at the Commission’s proposed instruments to implement the civil society dialogue points to a mismatch between rhetoric and policy tools. The policy tools to create this transnational dialogue are mainly geared towards domestic capacity building of civil society organisations from the candidate countries, knowledge and information exchanges between civil society organisations across Europe, and the promotion of debates between the EU political elites and those of the candidate countries. The policy tools geared to extending the debate to the wider public are incorporated into existing EU consultation mechanisms where the enlargement issue is in danger of becoming
diluted. It seems as if the policy tools were one step behind the actual aspirations of the proclaimed objective of the ‘civil society dialogue’.

The paper will be structured as follows: The first section will outline the evolution of the concept of civil society dialogue in the discourse of EU Institutions from an input participatory mechanism in European governance to the building of a transnational public sphere in support of enlargement. The second section will outline, from a deliberative theory perspective the main tenets regarding the role of a deliberative public sphere in the context of a transnational polity such as the EU. The role of the different actors interacting in the public sphere will be established as well as the mechanisms required for the public sphere to fulfil its deliberative and legitimating functions. This will provide a template to, in section three evaluate whether the aspirations of the civil dialogue to engineer a public sphere on enlargement are matched by the adequate policy tools and the existence of well-equipped civil society organisations and channels for transnational deliberation. Section three examines the civil society dialogue in the context of enlargement highlighting the mismatch between the deliberative ambition and the constraints brought about by the inadequacies of the policy tools and the state of civil society in the candidate countries. The final section outlines relevant concluding remarks regarding the new conceptualisation of the civil society dialogue, to then reflect on the implications for the engagement of civil society in the building of a transnational public sphere.

1. Dialogue with Civil Society: From Participation to Communication and Deliberation

The end of the permissive consensus epitomised by the almost-non in France and the Danish *nej* in the run up to ratifying the Maastricht Treaty prompted a search for solutions to the widely acknowledged democratic deficit. The EU is a supranational polity where decisions are reached by experts, not accountable to elected representatives, and laws are passed with little transparency and publicity. The EU has no demos or a certain level of social unity or a common identity that would provide the basis for a parliamentary expression of democracy. In the presence of fragmented political parties and interest groups that may engage in action at the European level but remaining mainly nationally focused, and in the absence of a European public sphere, the participation of civil society in European governance has emerged as one of the possible remedies to the democratic deficit. Given the supranational character of the
EU, it seems unrealistic to directly involve citizens in the policy process. Therefore, civil society is conceived of as contributing to effective governance and problem-solving through functional participation in the policy process and as intermediaries between the citizens and the political authority, thus addressing the perceived democratic deficit. This section traces the vertical understanding of the civil society dialogue in the EU’s institutional discourse to illustrate how the concept has evolved from being a link between the citizens and the EU institutions to becoming a horizontal tool facilitating deliberation across Europe.

The idea of a civil society dialogue or civil dialogue (as a mirror to the institutionalised social dialogue between the EU and social partners) was first developed by the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in the later 1990s. The EESC was in fact the first institution to address the need to enable civil society to participate in the decision-making process and thus reduce the democratic deficit via the implementation of the participatory model of civil society (Smismans 2003:492). This is not surprising as Committee views itself as the bridge with civil society thus facilitating dialogue between civil society and the institutions and within civil society itself.3

The European Parliament (EP), however, views its relationship with civil society not as a source of legitimacy, as MEPs are directly elected but as a source of information and expertise for effective problem solving. The EP has traditionally been the champion of diffuse interests as they generally coincide with popular causes. Thus the EP develops formal and informal consultation with civil society particularly on policy areas subject to the codecision procedure (i.e. those policy areas where the EP and the Council of ministers co-legislate). The dialogue with parliamentary intergroups4 constitutes the main formalised channel of interaction between EP and civil society. There are instances of bilateral dialogue with specific parliamentary committees on annual or biannual bases to discuss the broader agenda and develop mutual understanding. Ad hoc hearings on specific issues such as climate change or treaty reform are also organised and civil society organisation are invited to take part. In the

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3 Civil society is an integral part of the Committee. The EESC is structured in three groups, Group III is composed of various civil society organisations (that account for about a third of the 344 members), while Group I represents national employers’ organisations and Group II represents national trade unions.

4 Informal cross-party groupings that they provide a space for MEPs to discuss shared interests.
shadow of the Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate\(^5\), the European Parliament set up a ‘Citizens Agora’ in September 2007.\(^6\) Yet, unlike the Commission the EP does not need an additional source of legitimacy, hence its caution when assessing the potential benefit of a civil society dialogue which ‘must be introduced cautiously with a constant eye to the recognised principles and structural elements of representative democracy and the rule of law’ (European Parliament 2001).

The European Commission’s discourse on civil society dialogue has traditionally fluctuated between the EESC and the EP’s approach evolving from an initial focus on the concept on the desirable increased involvement of NGOs in the social sector, to a subsequent shift to a the more widely used concept of ‘civil society’ as a key for administrative reform of the Commission and legitimisation of its position and of the European construction more generally (Smismans 2003:484). The Commission’s report on ‘An Open and Structured Dialogue between the Commission and Special Interest Groups’ acknowledged the need to engage with interest groups in order to gather information whether regarding technical aspects of a policy or to preliminary information about what kind of reactions an envisaged policy might have in the member states. The Commission’s relatively small bureaucracy needs to be supplemented with on-the-ground information from outside interest groups, which have become interlocutors in the policy process in exchange for information. In the words of the European Commission ‘The Commission has always been an institution open to outside input. The Commission believes this process to be fundamental to the development of its policies. This dialogue has proved valuable to both the Commission and to interested outside parties. Commission officials acknowledge the need for outside input and welcome it’ (European Commission 1992).

The 2001 White Paper assigned a key function to civil society for the implementation of good governance through openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. In view of the Commission: ‘The quality, relevance and effectiveness of EU policies depend on ensuring wide participation throughout the policy chain – from conception to implementation. Improved participation is likely create more confidence in the end result and in the Institutions which deliver policies’

\(^5\) From now on Plan D.
\(^6\) This is an online public space intended to better involve EU citizens in discussions on the EP’s legislative agenda. The role of civil society as intermediaries between the EU institutions and the citizens is clearly outlined here as civil society organisations are charged with drafting conclusions that are subsequently submitted to other EU and national institutions.
Thus new modes of governance, based on networking among stakeholders and a stronger articulation of the interests of citizens in the policy process, were proposed along with traditional modes of government, based on hierarchical, state-led decision-making processes. The White Paper was followed by further initiatives to shape the civil society dialogue. In 2002, as part of the ‘Better Regulation Action Plan’, the Commission defined a new methodology for impact assessment, which gave a specific role to the consultation of stakeholders that are affected by a decision (because of their expert knowledge) and their constituencies.

The European Commission’s dialogue with civil society takes place through formal and informal mechanism mainly at the agenda-setting phase of the policy process. The Commission deploys a number of instruments to engage civil society to discuss policy initiatives and general policy strategy such as biannual meetings some of the main civil society platforms and multi-stakeholder forums. Similarly the Commission engages in more specific technical dialogue through consultative committees, expert groups and scientific committees as well as through seminars, workshops and roundtables on specific policy issues to which civil society organisations are invited. Public internet consultations either ‘focused’ or ‘open’ are held on most policy initiatives as result of the EU’s Plan D (see below). While they allow outreach to a greater number of actors, they raise questions regarding the mediating role of civil society organisations as virtually anybody can engage in them. Similar questions are raised by the Commission’s increasing use of focus groups and citizens panels to target specific constituencies. Civil society is able to partially engage in the implementation phase mainly as whistle-blowers monitoring the implementation of EU legislation.

The ideas contained in the White Paper inform the EU’s convention experiments in the drafting of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Constitutional Treaty. With its opened design, the convention method aimed to engage civil society organisations as well as European citizens via consultation and deliberation. Hence civil society organisations were expected to facilitate the deliberation between the EU institutions and the citizens while the EU would also engage in direct dialogue with the citizens through e-consultations involving citizens directly. As I will argue later in the paper, this dual strategy will inform the horizontal dimension of the civil society dialogue in the context of enlargement. The expectation was to help develop a
functioning European public sphere\(^7\) that would mobilise the citizens in debating Europe. Civil society groups would play a key role as bridges between the EU and its citizens, while a viable public sphere would not only contributes to the legitimacy of a system but also to the accountability by showing political actors in action and providing a forum for evaluating their performance (de Vreese 2007). The exercise did not succeed in addressing the end of the permissive consensus. The Convention reproduced a model of closed elitist politics which did not communicate sufficiently with the citizens whose participation in the open deliberative fora was very limited compared to that of the usual Brussels suspects; while the role of civil society organisation was always going to be limited in the context of a Convention designed as a drafting phase in preparation for the real decisive phase during the IGC (Pérez-Solórzano Borragán 2007). Similarly, the commitment to an open, transparent and regular dialogue between institutions and representative associations and civil society; and to a citizen’s initiative allowing citizens (no less than one million who are nationals of a significant number of Member States) to submit to the Commission any appropriate proposal on matters where they consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaty did very little to positively mobilise the citizens of all member states in debating and supporting the direction of integration. The negative outcomes of the French and Dutch referenda on the Constitutional Treaty and the Irish no to the Lisbon Treaty against the background of decreasing support for enlargement reflected yet another stage in the politicisation of European integration characterised by the negative mobilisation of public opinion with regard to EU policies and institutions. ‘Mass public will have to be incorporated within the process of regional integration and their preferences cannot be reduced to the satisfaction of marginally greater material benefits’ (Schmitter 2009:212). The challenging shift from ‘permissive consensus’ to ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe and Marks 2008) characterised by domestic politics becoming more tightly coupled with European outcomes, thus bargaining among national government is constrained by the fear of referendum defeat. Thus less supportive citizens, the wide gap between public and elite, an increased fear of referendum defeat ‘narrow the substantive ground of possible agreement’ and make national governments less willing to compromise (Hooghe and Marks 2008:21-22).

\(^7\) The original Habermasian notion of a public sphere conceives of it as an arena for ‘the perception, identification, and treatment of problems affecting the whole society’.
The EU’s reaction to the challenge of enhanced politicisation in the aftermath of the 2004 enlargement and following the negative votes in France and the Netherlands on the Constitutional Treaty was a period of reflection that would be ‘used to enable a broad debate to take place in each of our countries, involving citizens, civil society, social partners, national parliaments and political parties’ (European Council 2005). The European Commission’s Action Plan on communicating Europe, the Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate and White Paper on Communication Strategy and Democracy framed the EU’s approach to this reflective but communicative period. With the motto “listening better”, “explaining better” and “going local” (European Commission 2008c) Plan D was to set reinvigorate European democracy and help the emergence of a European public sphere, where citizens are given the information and the tools to actively participate in the decision making process and gain ownership of the European project (European Commission 2005c). Such a perception clearly resonates with Habermas’ assertion that the deficit in democracy can only be eliminated if a European public sphere comes into existence (Habermas, 2001). Similarly, the focus on communicating Europe resonates with Trenz’s conception of the European public space (a term also used as part of the Plan D rhetoric in relation to the creation of ‘real meeting places for European citizens’) as ‘European political communication’ as any form of communication which refers to European governance in the wide sense, expressing consensus or dissent with regard to particular issues (Trenz 2004). Thus in a Habermasian fashion the Plan D set to inject more democracy into the Union by stimulating a wide public debate that would help build a new consensus on the future direction of the Union. Drawing on the communication experience of the Convention the key elements of the plan consist of the use of new technologies, more consultation with civil society stakeholders, the establishment of new networks, the strengthening of the regional and local dimension, and educating European citizens.

In the Plan D Civil society organisations are conceived as horizontal facilitators and mediators of the debate as well as and parties to the debate together with social partners, national parliaments and political parties, the media and specific target groups, such as young people and minority groups. Here the key question to address is what role civil society organisations may play in this process of public sphere formation. This question will be addressed in the next section of this paper. The Plan D illustrates the EU’s attempts at bridging the gap with Europe’s citizens and thus
resolving the less benign consequences of the increasing politicisation of debates about Europe. Hence a direct dialogue with those elusive citizens whose consensual support had been so clearly overlooked becomes the remedy to the EU’s communication gap and the justification for the EU’s engineering of a public space where the EU communicates, the citizens debate and become educated and empowered and civil society organisations facilitate the dialogue. As I will argue in section three below, this combination, of participation, communication and deliberation is a tool applied not only to within the EU but has crucially become part an instrument of the European Union’s enlargement strategy, thus acquiring a new external dimension.

2. A Deliberative Public Sphere and Civil Society Organisations

This section draws on deliberative theory to analyse the role of institutions in the engineering of a public sphere and the potential democratising role of civil society organisations as mediating actors. An analysis of the models of public sphere and the potential for the creation of a European public sphere based on the normative debate and previous EU-led attempts to create a public sphere from above, such as the Constitutional Convention will generate the analytical framework to assess the potential of the civil society dialogue to become a trans-European public sphere.

The Deliberative perspective conceives of democratic politics as governing by public discussion. Opinions are therefore shaped and tested in public debate. People are able to change their opinions when faced with qualitatively better arguments. ‘Democratic politics entails giving reasons for government decisions to the ones who are bound by them. Only norms and statutes that are justified to those affected and that are accepted by all in a free debate can claim to be truly legitimate’ (Eriksen and Fossum 2002:402) A viable public sphere is an essential prerequisite because it forces the decision-makers to justify the decisions to the ones affected by them.

Defining public sphere and what it entails is a contested debate and engaging in it is not the purpose of this paper. Yet, agreeing on a working definition is essential to determine whether the civil society dialogue aims to generate a public sphere and if so, what kind and how likely are the policy instruments devised by the European Commission to achieve it. The working definition of public sphere in the context of this paper is a ‘space’ within which citizens, civil society organisations and political actors publicly debate issues of common concern. It is a highly complex network of various parts of public spheres, which stretch across different levels, spaces and scales.
There are strictly situated public spheres, where the participants meet face to face, there are written public spheres, and there are anonymous, faceless public spheres made possible by the new electronic media and technological developments (Habermas, 1996 as quoted in Eriksen and Fossum 2002:405). Eriksen and Fossum distinguish between strong publics to refer to institutionalized deliberations that feature opinion formation and decision-making and general publics\(^8\) that feature opinion formation only without decision-making. In practice, strong publics refers to parliamentary assemblies and discursive bodies in formally organized institutions imbued with decision-making power, yet constrained by the logic of arguing and impartial justification. General publics, refers to the sphere of deliberation outside the political system’ (Eriksen and Fossum 2002:405). As section three will show, the European Commission’s aspirations in relation to the civil society dialogue in the context of enlargement refer to the emergence of a public sphere as general public. Yet, as it will be argued below, post-national polities such as the European Union face a number of difficulties to engineer general publics by aggregating the interests of the wider public. It is however better equipped to foster the deliberation of strong publics that in turn provides legitimacy to the polity on the basis of the deliberative quality of the decision-making process and the efficiency of the policy outcome as better informed decision-makers will produce better decisions. Therefore despite its political aspirations the EU may be constrained by its own systemic characteristics and thus only able to engineer deliberation amongst strong publics.

The public sphere performs three functions in a democratic context: (i) to enable citizens to form an informed opinion about how they can connect their own preferences with the political options available; (ii) to hold decision-makers accountable for their actions; (iii) to contribute to overall social cohesion and trust by giving a wide range of groups within the society an opportunity to make their voice heard (Kurpas, Brüggemann and Meyer 2006:2-3). Therefore, the public sphere depends on the interaction of collective actors (i.e. civil society organisations), citizens and collective political actors and it should communicate, hold accountable and generate trust. We would thus expect the civil society dialogue to involve these three sets of actors and to fulfil the three sets of functions outlined above.

\(^8\) Also known as weak publics.
These three sets of actors perform specific functions. Hence, political actors would try to mobilize adherence for themselves and their actions; civil society organisations would communicate these messages and the citizens would need to be interested in the issues for debate. Given that citizens’ interest in European affairs will be determined by whether they perceive European decisions and actors as relevant to their own situation, the media are crucial mediators in the process. The mass media, whether national, regional or transnational are the main source of information about the European Union thus shaping the visibility of European affairs and influencing the degree of citizens’ interest and subsequently willingness to engage in public deliberation. Crucially as Fossum and Trenz (2006:11-12) argue, the media do not operate as instrument of popular enlightenment neither do they work as mirror of the political system, or amplifier of government information strategies; rather they apply their own rules in selecting and framing the news. Therefore, political actors are dependent on the media’s framing of European affairs at a minimum in terms of visibility and at a maximum regarding the effect that the communicative exercise would have in the citizens, including the failure in communication. However, this is insufficient as the message communicated may be understood differently by the public (in other words even when they transmit a positive message about a political initiative it is not necessarily the case that citizens will follow it) or the communication may not have an effect at all. The national referenda on the Constitutional Treaty showed that enhanced media communication does not necessarily result in a common understanding of the available choices. Nevertheless, given this logic, the media would, in the context of the civil society dialogue, be expected to play a fundamental role in framing the deliberation between the citizens of the EU member states and the candidate countries in relation to enlargement but also about each other’s cultures, values, beliefs and differences.

Most importantly for the purpose of this paper, what role can civil society organisations play in establishing a space for the public deliberation of values and policies? From a deliberative perspective, civil society organisations have the potential ‘to act as a discursive interface between international organizations and a global citizenry. Their role is to monitor policy-making in these institutions, to bring citizens’ concerns into their deliberations and to empower marginalized groups so that they too may participate effectively’ (Nanz and Steffek 2004:315). In the EU context, civil society organisations would operate as a dual ‘transmission belt’ between the
deliberative processes in the European Union and the citizens. On the one hand civil society organisations would articulate citizens concerns and incorporate them into the EU’s deliberative structures. In doing so, civil society has the potential to develop a shared sense of transnational identity and trust through the deliberative experiences of interested citizens. For this to occur, civil society organisations must have the appropriate mechanisms to communicate regularly with the citizens to be able to establish what the main concerns are, to be responsive to new issues and to aggregate the European. Civil society organisations ought to have adequate open and transparent procedures to communicate with the citizens usually via their constituencies. To perform the second function civil society organisations need to be aware of the policy agendas discussed by the EU and have access to the relevant deliberative fora. All of this would be possible only if civil society organisations themselves have the necessary capabilities to engage with citizens and promote deliberation but also to interact directly in the national and European deliberative structures.

Having set out the internal dynamics of a public sphere, it is important to determine under what conditions one might expect a public sphere to emerge. In their comparative study of Germany the Netherlands and Switzerland, Koopmans, Neidhardt, and Pfetsch establish that the creation of a public sphere occurs against a background of strong civil organisations, developed mass media and professional journalism, the existence of a common (national) identity, language and culture, a high degree of ethnic homogeneity and the nationalization and democratization of political institutions. They observe that in the German case, ‘increasingly free public debate made politics more transparent and mobilized the citizenry and civic organizations for political participation (Koopmans, Neidhardt, and Pfetsch:5). The question to address now is whether these conditions are present in the context of the EU to ascertain whether a European public sphere may emerge.

In the context of the European Union, the public sphere deficit, has become a prominent argument in the debates about Union’s democratic legitimacy. As Habermas has put it, ‘there is still no European public space, no transnational bundling of themes, no common discussion’ (Habermas 2005 in Fossum and Trenz 2006:5) Hence the absence of this deliberative space reflects the detachment between political elites and the citizens of Europe and explains the negative politicisation of European integration. Yet despite these measures, much of the normative debate has stressed the EU’s systemic shortcomings. The European Union is a fragmented polity where there is
limited dialogue between the citizens of the member states on European affairs. Hence the solidarity and trust that gel a public sphere lack a fertile ground to develop. The only transnational debates occur between national political elites and European elites and these have traditionally been characterised by high a level of consensus thus political issues are usually publicly presented as purely technocratic (such as the general agreement that the Lisbon Treaty being a regular reform treaty rather than a constitution did not require ratification via national referenda) and conflictive issues are simply dealt with behind closed doors (such as treaty reform). Similarly, the European Union lacks a common identity, values language or culture and crucially a demos. This fragmented polity is also characterised for being largely undemocratic. The limitations to citizen involvement and participation also prevent the development of a public sphere. The absence of a European public sphere has also been linked to the underpoliticisation of European integration (Fossum and Trenz 2006:7). Against arguments proclaiming the end of the public consensus, the evidence of low turn-out to European Parliament elections, lack of interest in European issues particularly if compared to national issues, and general disinterest in engaging in European debates illustrate how the absence of interested citizens would prevent the development of a public sphere. Moreover, even if European integration has been politicised when citizens manifest their views, they do not do so through the deliberative mechanisms of the public sphere but via national referenda (as in the case of the Constitutional Treaty of the Lisbon Treaty) which are informed by fragmented national discourses (Fossum and Trenz 2006:7). Moreover, as Fossum and Trenz rightly point out, the political elites reaction to the perceived negative politicisation epitomised in the absence of a consensus between the political elites and the general public on the available choices (as in the case of the Constitutional Treaty), turns to developing enhanced communication with relevant stakeholders an relevant audiences. The normative assumption is that the negative politicisation is the result of the public’s lack of information and thus immature reaction to the consensual options put forward by the political elites (Fossum and Trenz 2006:19). However, there are a number of limitations to the Commission’s approach to address the public sphere deficit. The strategy is informed by a consensual conviction that ‘truly communicative efforts will lead to a deep understanding uniting all Europeans to stand for the common project’ (Trenz and Vetter R 2006:2) and the belief that dialogue and understanding can be engineered from above. In other words, the expectation is that the consensual approach
that has characterised elite deliberations can be extended to the ordinary citizens who will become as result of dialogue and participation will become empowered and well connected with each other. The policy instruments that will help achieve such goals include:

(i) The stimulation of debates in the twenty five member states by using common frameworks but implemented in a decentralised manner as member states need to account for the diversity of the population, cultures and different sensitivities. The tools to stimulate debates range from series of visits by Commissioners to Member States to European citizens’ projects, aimed at engineering a multi-level public sphere to inform and educate citizens via workshops, consultations and e-democracy tools (such as a European debating website connected to a network of national debating sub-sites, combined with local, national and European debating events). Civil society organisations facilitate the transnational citizens projects such as European Round Table for democracy crucially aimed at creating a transnational public sphere ‘enabling people from the different national public spheres to connect with each other as European citizens and debate the future of the EU’ (European Commission 2008c). Similarly, under the heading ‘Promoting citizens’ participation in the democratic process’ civil society is presented as an instrument ‘to fertilise the ground for creative local Citizens Initiatives (European Commission 2006b:5). Drawing on the the issues identified earlier in this section the success of these initiatives will be dependent on whether citizens are interested enough in the issues to deliberate to engage in these debates, as it is not automatically the case that the availability of these fora, whether virtual or not, is a sufficient incentive for participation. Similarly, civil society organisations are being expected to fulfil functions which go beyond the mere aggregation of interests as facilitators of transnational debates, which will require specific capabilities. The decentralised approach is symptomatic of the EU’s fragmented political reality.

(ii) A feedback process structured by the Commission drawing together the main conclusions from the debates and preparing a synthesis report of the national debates for the European Council. Here civil society organisations are the main link between the national deliberative spheres and the EU institutions as they facilitate the aggregation of opinions and engage in drafting the European view.

An important innovation brought about by the Plan D is that it is understood as a listening exercise so that the EU can address citizens’ concerns. As Fossum and Trenz
argue, incorporates an element of reflexivity as the national debates are expected to feed back into European Union action not only in relation to the policy substance of the debate but also in relation to the quality of the communication exercise. They argue further that the diagnosis of the communication failures through reflexivity has the potential to become a mechanism for collective identity formation that would allow citizens to imagine themselves as European. This has the potential to create a public sphere that is not sustained by deliberation only but also by how it is imagined and perceived by European citizens. In other words, following theories of reflexive integration, the authors maintain that the deliberative exercise will detect the substance or cause of the communication failure and will also observe and communicate them thus developing collective learning processes that fosters a collective identity and a shared public sphere of public opinion and will formation (Fossum and Trenz 2006:20). Yet, while symbolic mechanisms may be enough to develop a positive identity for the European public sphere, reflection may lead to a common agreement about the difficulties in implementing the public sphere. So its existence would be based on a common negative assessment (2006:23).

The normative assumptions informing the EU’s attempt to deal with the public sphere deficit after the constitutional crisis inform much of the civil society dialogue in the context of enlargement, it is to the analysis of this overarching enlargement tool that his paper turns now.


The aim of this section is to establish how the concept of civil society dialogue has entered the European Union’s enlargement strategy. The argument developed here is that unlike its previous impersonation in the EU’s discourses on legitimacy and participation, civil society dialogue, in the context of enlargement is not concerned only with a dialogue between EU institutions and civil society organisations

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9 In the context of enlargement, civil society is defined as to include all possible intermediary actors such as ‘the labour-market actors, i.e. the social partners (trade unions and employers federations); organisations representing social and economic players at large (consumer organisations for instance.); non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations, i.e. organisations at grassroots level through which citizens participate in local and municipal life (e.g. youth or family associations); religious communities and media’, all society structures outside of government and public administration, local communities and municipalities, the education, media and culture sectors and opinion leaders from national and European institutions. (European Commission 2005a:4).
enhancing input and output legitimacy. In the shadow of the Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate and the White Paper on a European Communication Policy, the EU expects to address the politicisation of enlargement and the information gap by creating a dialogue between the member states and the candidate countries parallel to the accession negotiation process. As part of this deliberative discourse, civil society organisations are portrayed as facilitators of a horizontal dialogue between the citizens of the EU and those of the candidate countries. Yet the policy tools are inadequate to achieve such goal and geared towards elite socialisation and capacity building.

While engaging the citizens might have been a less salient issue during the previous enlargement wave due to the possible rhetorical entrapment\(^\text{10}\) of the citizens in the EU-15 given the moral obligation to enlarge and facilitate the CEECs’ return to Europe; and based also on the permissive consensus of the citizens in the candidate countries for whom accession to the EU had become almost a mythical aspiration with very little understanding of how adapting to the EU membership criteria might not necessarily positively affect their daily lives. At the beginning of the 21\(^{\text{st}}\) Century, ignoring the citizens is no longer an option and bringing the citizens on board of the enlargement project has become a paramount priority for the EU and candidate countries alike as enlargement is both, a politicised issue but also one of the possible exogenous causes explaining the politicisation of European integration itself as national interest are transformed by events such as the collapse of communism and the challenges posed by the new democracies’ expectation of accession to the EU.(Schmitter 2009:211-12) \(^\text{11}\)

Indeed the 2001 Eurobarometer shows that only 44 per cent of EU citizens supported enlargement (with opposition being greatest in France, Austria and Germany). By the spring of 2006, two years after the 2004 enlargement, the support had not increased substantially with 45 per cent of Europeans in favour and 42 per cent against. In 2007 the figure supporting enlargement had risen marginally to 49%. Therefore the outcome of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements while not provoking a general opposition to future enlargements has not fostered an overwhelming wave of support across the board. The

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\(^{10}\) Not used in the Schimmelfennig sense in ‘The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union’, International Organization, 55 (1) 2001, 47-80, where he uses this term to discuss the inevitability of the 2004 enlargement in view of the EU’s discourse since 1993 proclaiming its moral commitment to enlargement and its intention to enlarge. Not honouring this rhetoric would mean an important loss of credibility for the Union.

\(^{11}\) Schmitter (2009:212) identifies possible endogenous causes to politicisation such as integration into more functional areas of greater controversy and the allocation of greater decisional autonomy to supra-national actors and exogenous causes as the ones outlined above.
so-called enlargement fatigue appears to characterise the tendency in the EU-27 against a background of misinformation about enlargement, fears of mass migration, coupled with concerns regarding the accession of countries such as Turkey.

It is not surprising, therefore, that already in September 2000, when accession negotiations were formally launched with Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, and Slovakia, the then twelve candidates pledged their ‘support and readiness to cooperate with the EU member states and the European Commission in (...) providing information on the historical challenge and opportunities of enlargement in order to generate a dialogue with Europe’s citizens and to ensure broad support for the enlargement process both within the EU member states and the candidate countries’ [my emphasis] (DG Enlargement 2002:18). Similarly in its 2000 ‘Communications Strategy for Enlargement’, the European Commission responded to the perceived need to meet a growing demand for information about the enlargement process. With this strategy the European Commission expected to generate dialogue with public opinion in the candidate countries and the then EU-15 ‘to dispel misapprehensions about the enlargement process’. As Commissioner Reding put it, ‘the accession to the European Union of the Central and Eastern European countries gives rise to expectations as well as fears. The information and communication campaign launched by the Commission aims to inform the European Citizen, in an objective and reasoned way, of the stakes and the challenges of enlargement’. (2000b). The expectation was that such a strategy would ‘help ensure that the negotiations are concluded with public support and the resulting Treaties of Accession are signed and ratified on the basis of well-informed and realistic public expectations’ (European Commission 2000a:1). As it will be argued below, the decentralised approach, that is, adapted to the specific requirements of individual countries, regions, localities and sectors and clearly differentiated strategies for EU member states and candidate countries; and the use of instruments such as generating discussions about enlargement through governments, the media, national parliament, interest groups, teachers and civil society organisations present in the 2000 strategy would be reproduced in the 2005 Communication.

The concept of a civil society dialogue is used explicitly for the first time as part of the European Commission’s three-pillar strategy for Turkey’s accession negotiation. Thus the strategy included a first pillar focused on reinforcing the political reform process in Turkey; a second pillar on conducting negotiations under a revised methodological approach; and a third pillar featuring a ‘strengthened political and
cultural dialogue bringing people together from EU Member States and Turkey’ [my emphasis] (European Commission 2004:2). Such strengthened dialogue aimed to bring ‘people together from Member States and Turkey, where concerns and perceptions can be discussed in a frank and open manner […] Civil society should play the most important role in this dialogue, which should be facilitated by the EU’ (European Commission 2004:8). Very clearly, the declaratory rhetoric used in the Communication emphasises the aspiration to develop a transnational dialogue involving Turkey and the EU member states and the expectation that civil society should be involved in such dialogue. The civil society dialogue, as the earlier 2000 communication strategy is inspired by the need to close the information gap and allow citizens to understand the enlargement process better as well each other.

The civil society dialogue is further developed in the 2005 Communication ‘Civil Society Dialogue between the EU and Candidate Countries’ published at around the same time as the Plan D. In this document, the dialogue with civil society is framed as an overarching communication instrument with a very wide remit in terms of objectives, areas of concern, actors involved and territory as the initiative is extended to Croatia. The 2006 Communication ‘The Western Balkans on the Road to the EU: Consolidating Stability and Raising Prosperity’ expands the civil society dialogue to include all the countries of the Western Balkans with an additional focus on enhancing dialogue between Western Balkan societies. The discursive turn in the understanding of the civil dialogue is clear when compared to its previous impersonation. Civil society dialogue in this context is not concerned with the consultation and participation or civil society groups in policy-making as in previous impersonations. Civil society dialogue is about the top-down engineering of a public sphere debating enlargement, where the exchange of information and opinions would result not just in better informed citizens but ones supportive of the enlargement process. Hence the civil society dialogue is expected to ‘better inform the public opinions from the EU and candidate countries, by addressing the opportunities as well as challenges posed by future enlargement’ (European Commission 2005a:3). The dialogue is not aimed only at bridging the information gap but to generate debate, ‘a discussion on perceptions regarding everyday culture and values expressed by the society and the State on both sides’. This public debate would lead ‘to a deeper understanding and acceptance of EU values and standards’ [my emphasis] (European Commission 2005a:3).
An additional dimension of the civil society dialogue illustrates further the discursive turn in the understanding of the term. In the context of enlargement, the civil society dialogue would ‘support the further development of a lively and vibrant civil society in the candidate countries, which is key to the consolidation of human rights and democracy, in line with the political criteria for accession’ (European Commission 2005a:3). Thus civil society appears to be conceived of as a party in the dialogue, a facilitator of citizen engagement and an outcome of the process. As Commissioner Rhen (2008) puts it ‘Communicating the success story of enlargement is a common challenge for us all. As civil society representatives, you are the bridge between the EU institutions, national authorities and citizens. You can raise awareness of the successes and challenges of EU enlargement. You can strengthen confidence between citizens in the EU and the aspirant members’. Clearly this connotation reflects the EU’s need to address the limited capabilities of civil society organisations in the candidate countries. This is a concern that is not present when understanding civil society dialogue as an intra-EU tool of dialogue between civil society and the EU institutions or as a deliberative tool helping aggregate the European public sphere. Before civil society organisations can become the bridge between the EU institutions, national authorities and citizens and raise awareness of the successes and challenges of EU enlargement as the Commission aspires to, these civil society organisations need to be equipped to do so and at present they are not. As the literature on interest representation in the candidate countries shows (Howard 2002; Pérez-Solórzano Borragán 2004 and 2006), civil society is still weak compared with the position and status of intermediary organisations in the old Member States. The defining features of this weak civil society are low levels of organisational membership, low levels of participation in associational life, limited expertise, low levels of trust in organised civil society organisations and limited de facto consultative procedures (Pérez-Solórzano Borragán 2006, 135). Against this background it is not surprising that the policy tools (as it will be shown below) should be prioritise the strengthening of domestic civil society organisations rather than the engineering of a public sphere. Such a focus has become more evident after the launch of the European Commission’s 2008 ‘New Civil Society Dialogue Programme’ where the civil society dialogue is re-labelled as the ‘People to People – P2P Programme’ aimed at strengthening ‘the role of the civil society organisations in participative democracy, by stimulating an active civil society at regional, national and European levels’ (European Commission 2008b:1). As it will
be argued below, such measures may end up producing trans-European strong publics as they tend to engage mainly experts and political elites rather than general publics as the discursive framing of the civil society dialogue suggests.

Similar to the Plan D, the civil society dialogue in the context of enlargement accounts for differentiated national approaches. But interestingly enough, the national variations are not just a reflection of the possible differences in terms of culture or salient national concerns, but a clear differentiation in the policy aspirations of the deliberate outcome that the civil dialogue is expected to accomplish. Thus the civil society dialogue as transnational dialogue is presented only in relation to Turkey. Turkish accession is perceived as being more controversial (or generating ‘lively debate’ in the Commission’s diplomatic turn of phrase) and therefore necessitating a transnational deliberative solution that engages Turkish citizens as well as citizens of the EU member states. The civil society dialogue in relation Croatia aims to enhance public debate in Croatia about EU membership. In the case of the Western Balkans, the civil society dialogue aims to enhance dialogue amongst the candidate and potential candidate countries themselves to address their conflictive common past. Clearly, while the normative underpinnings coincide, in other words, a deliberative public sphere will generate better informed citizens and therefore supportive of the relevant political initiative, the scope of the dialogue is both national and transnational while, depending on the country it is geared towards addressing different politicised issues.

So with a civil society dialogue that aims not only to generate public spheres across different levels but also to address the deficiencies of domestic civil societies, it is not surprising that the policy tools should be heterogenous but also aimed at different outcomes. Hence, the measures can be divided into three categories:

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12 The focus on Turkey is well justified. Turkish accession has been problematised due to its human rights record, its large population which would make it one of the largest member states, its sensitive geographical and geo-political situation, its huge agricultural sector and the fact that it is a predominantly Muslim country. European opposition to Turkish EU membership has risen constantly over the last decade and exceeded 50% for the first time in 2005. This development runs contrary to the general trend of more favourable attitudes to further enlargement recently, as the Eurobarometer from spring 2007 revealed. 49% spoke in favour of further accession rounds while 39% were opposed.

13 What follows draws on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Recommendation of the European Commission on Turkey’s progress towards accession; the 2005 Communication ‘Civil Society Dialogue between the EU and Candidate Countries’; and the 2006 Communication ‘The Western Balkans on the Road to the EU: Consolidating Stability and Raising Prosperity’.

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1. Support for local civil society initiatives and capacity-building, reinforcing the role of civil society;
2. Programmes to bring journalists, young politicians, trade union leaders, teachers, into contact with EU institutions and thus raise awareness about the EU and enlargement;
3. Support for building partnerships and developing networks between the civil society organisations, businesses, trade unions and other social partners and professional organisations in the beneficiary countries and their counterparts in the EU to promote transfers of knowledge and experience.
4. Involving the media in awareness raising to improve citizens information.

A more detailed evaluation of these measures allows some initial conclusions about the potential of the civil society dialogue to meet the general aspiration of creating a transnational European deliberative public sphere which is supportive of enlargement. In general terms the policy tools address all the relevant actors operating in the public sphere namely institutions, civil society organisations and the media. Looking in more detail at the actual initiatives to generate a transnational debate (particularly in the case of Turkey), it is interesting to see that the Commission is relying on mechanisms to increase awareness about Turkey in the EU member states but none of these address as in the case of the Plan D, for instance, the creation of deliberative fora for discussion. Rather the initiatives refer to mobility programmes, scholarships, media development, financial support to NGO development, exchanges between professional organisations, and school links and public relations activities sponsored by the Turkish government (European Commission 2005a:5-8). These mechanisms could potentially address the perceived information gap and thus help better informed citizens both in Turkey and in the EU to become more supportive of enlargement. Drawing on the discussion developed in section two, it is not obvious that these mechanisms would either change perceptions as there is no control on how message may be understood by citizens; or help bring citizens in Turkey and in the EU to a deeper understanding of each other and the enlargement process thus uniting them in supporting and therefore legitimating this common project. Some measures such as multi-media debates in the member states engaging opinion leaders from accession countries and the EU and the development of a virtual debate on topics related to the civil society dialogue and regular "chats" on accession-related topics, with the participation of key actors and other interested parties
could encourage the creation of a genuine deliberative space. Here, the European Commission draws on existing mechanisms created as result of the Plan D such as ‘Active citizenship for Europe’ aims to bring people from different parts of Europe together in order to promote mutual understanding, a sense of ownership of the EU and the emergence of a European identity. The issue here is that so far, most activities under this heading have hardly featured enlargement. Moreover, as the Convention experience showed it is far from obvious that this kind of virtual debate engineer from above will yield a deliberative space that would help develop trust and cohesion by giving citizens the opportunity to make their voice heard; hold decision-makers accountable for their actions and help develop shared identities through deliberation.

In fact, the only institutionalised deliberating fora between citizen of the member states and Turkey, (where the Commission has made a clear commitment to developing a transnational dialogue) are those provided by the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee and the EESC’s Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) with Turkey. The former brings together Turkish MPs and MEPs to debate issues of common concern while the EESC’s JCC provides a deliberative forum on enlargement for EESC members and civil society representatives from Turkey. Clearly these two mechanisms point towards deliberation amongst strong publics without the involvement of the wider citizenry. The strong publics will provide legitimacy to the enlargement process on the basis of the deliberative quality of the decision-making and the efficiency of the policy outcome as better informed decision-makers will produce better decisions. As explained above, the EU, given its systemic characteristics has proved to be best placed to engineer deliberation amongst strong publics rather than deliberation between general publics.

The networking activities involving civil society organisations from the candidate countries and the Western Balkans and their counterparts in the member states are geared towards providing socialising mechanisms so that knowledge transfer can take place and the civil society organisations form the candidate countries can learn how to operate in a pluralistic and learn from the best practice of their EU counterparts. In other words, these initiatives would allow for the socialisation of the professional elites and strengthen the capacity building of civil society organisations in the candidate countries through the sharing of best practice. The policy tools deployed by the Commission point towards deliberation amongst general publics. But a deliberation that is not aimed at aggregating the deliberative experiences of different sectoral
general publics but rather aimed at developing sectoral deliberative fora composed of interested citizens. Thus, clearly reproducing the systemic fragmentation that has traditionally limited emergence of a truly pan-European public sphere. Here some kind of aggregating mechanism would be required. The expectation would be that civil society organisations are able to act as a discursive interface between the EU and the citizens of the member states and the candidate countries by monitoring policy-making and to bring citizens’ concerns into EU deliberations. To date, the civil society dialogue does not provide any kind of feedback or reflexive mechanisms that would facilitate the fulfilment of civil society organisations’ potential to help dynamise a public sphere on enlargement. Furthermore, a question still to be addressed is whether civil society organisations in the candidate countries actually posses the capabilities and expertise to operate aggregate the interest of their constituencies and subsequently channel their concerns to the European level. The answer to this question is no. The number of capacity-building mechanisms that the civil society dialogue deploys suggest that civil society organisations in the candidate countries and the Balkans are far from ready to perform the dual conveyor belt function outlined in section two (i.e. aggregating the wider interest and channelling it to the decision-makers). The civil society dialogue’s aspirations are not matched by the capacity and expertise of civil society organisations in the candidate countries, hence the policy measures are aimed to equip them with the relevant tools to fulfil their functions. There is a clear mismatch, therefore, between policy aspirations, and policy tools as the latter need to be addressed first. A useful illustration of this is the strategy outlined in the 2008 ‘New Civil Society Dialogue Programme’ launched by the European Commission. Here the Commission talks about the civil society dialogue as ‘People to People – P2P Programme’ aimed at strengthening ‘the role of the civil society organisations in participative democracy, by stimulating an active civil society at regional, national and European levels’ (European Commission 2008b:1). Specifically the P2P Programme\(^\text{14}\) is to be implemented through (1) EU visits for groups of people belonging to existing organisations, individuals who play a central role in disseminating information on EU policies and are reputed promoters of civil society rights and role; (2) awareness raising on relevant EU matters by bringing understanding of the acquis closer to citizens. Here the EU delegations in the candidate countries are expected to play a leading role (3)

\(^{14}\) With a budget of (€4 Million)
Stimulating NGOs influence and dissemination of knowledge and (4) improving the relation between civil society organisations and between them and public authorities. A main tool to achieve these goals is the ‘Active civil society in Europe’ initiative, set up as result of the Plan D to help European civil society play a more active role on the European stage by supporting NGOs, trade unions, think tanks, associations, and other non-governmental bodies. Here the focus is on operating grants covering part of their running costs and support for concrete cross-border co-operation projects with the objective to raise awareness of issues of common interest and on the concrete solutions that can be found through collaboration and coordination at European level.\(^\text{15}\)

Similarly, the actions outlined in the 2008 strategy prioritise the support for civil society engagement at the national level and the provision of expertise with ideas that resonate very clearly with those of the pre-civil society dialogue approach. The main objectives are enhancing the legitimacy and credibility of civil society at the national level; providing support and expertise to develop the absorption capacity of civil society organisations; fostering cooperation between civil society organisations in the region; and the transfer of knowledge between business associations, trade unions, professional organisations and other civil society organisations with their EU counterparts, centred on themes such as health and safety, innovation, the environment, corporate social responsibility and EU integration. Recently implemented initiatives under the P2P programme include events on Health Challenges in Europe or Employment and Social Dialogue in 2008; or in 2009 events on Participatory democracy, lobbying and advocacy towards different levels of governance, stimulation citizens' participations in Civil Society; Safeguarding and promotion of rights for inclusion of disabled; Social aspects in agricultural sector; The role of the civil society in combating corruption; The role of the civil society in the inclusion of the Roma; Combating discrimination in all forms. Legislation and good practices; Access to justice. Legal aid; Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms; Research Potential in Europe; Consumer protection (TAIEX 2009). These are clear illustration of the capacity building orientation of the initiative by exchanging best practice and the creation of fragmented general publics.

Similarly, in addressing the role of the media, the Commission follows the logic that the media should be able to operate as instrument of popular enlightenment and

amplifier of EU and governmental information about enlargement. Hence the measures supported by the civil society dialogue include participation in the EU’s MEDIA programme to finance particularly audiovisual material with an EU content: ‘The Commission will support and part finance television programmes introducing various aspects of life and society in Turkey and in EU countries, as well as informing Turkish audiences about the EU, its rules and its policies, aimed at the general public both in the EU and in Turkey’ (European Commission 2005a:13). While the media play a fundamental role in framing the news, it is not obvious that engaging in a communicative exercise would be sufficient to create a deliberative space of the kind that the civil society dialogue aims to engineer. The messages transmitted by the media may be understood differently by the citizens or may have no effect at all, while enhanced media communication does not necessarily result in a common understanding of the available choices. Furthermore, similar to the case of civil society organisations, there is an emphasis on educating journalist by encouraging bilateral exchanges between journalists in the member states and in the candidate countries ‘develop an improved mutual understanding, and to provide opportunities for the exchange of best practices’ (European Commission 2005a:13). Here the emphasis is again on capacity building and the availability of socialisation opportunities for journalists. This again points towards the creation a specific deliberative space engaging the journalistic elite as another example of the fragmented general publics that the civil society dialogue will likely produce.

To conclude, the civil society dialogue is based on the normative assumption that through communication citizens will become better informed about the enlargement process and thus more supportive of the process. The tools aimed at generating public deliberation amongst the citizens of the member states and the candidate countries are still to be tested but previous experiences in the context of the EU show that these wide deliberative exercises tend to engage interested citizens rather than those for whom the issue of enlargement may become a heavily politicised issue should they be asked to ratify the accession of a new member state as the case may be in France, for instance. While civil society organisations are key actors in the process, there is a mismatch between their capabilities and the functions they are expected to fulfil. The current state of affairs suggests that the civil society dialogue will deliver as set of sectoral deliberative spheres that do not yet equip civil society organisations with the relevant
feedback mechanisms to aggregate a common European interest and channel citizens’ views to policy-makers.

**Conclusion**

The paper has traced the discursive move from a conception of civil society as purveyor of legitimacy within the EU to become a key actor in establishing a space for the public deliberation of values, concerns and policies aimed at engaging the citizens of Europe beyond the EU in an informed debate about enlargement. In tracing this discursive shift, the paper has shown that civil society dialogue in the context of enlargement reflects a wider EU strategy to counterbalance the negative politicisation of the process. Unlike its previous impersonation in the EU’s discourses on legitimacy and participation, civil society dialogue, in the context of enlargement is not concerned only with a dialogue between EU institutions and civil society organisations geared towards enhancing input and output legitimacy. In the shadow of the Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate and the White Paper on a European Communication Policy, the EU expects to address the politicisation of enlargement and the information gap by creating a dialogue between the member states and the candidate countries parallel to the accession negotiation process. As part of this deliberative discourse, civil society organisations are portrayed as facilitators of a horizontal dialogue between the citizens of the EU and those of the candidate countries. Yet the policy tools are inadequate to achieve such goal and focus primarily on elite socialisation and capacity building. A possible explanation of the inconsistency between policy aspirations and policy tools would be that the EU’s ambition to create a trans-European dialogue on enlargement is constrained by the inadequacies of civil society in the candidate countries which limits its ability to develop any potential in creating a deliberative public sphere until it is appropriately equipped. While the aspiration might be to create a trans-European informed debate about enlargement the limited capabilities of civil society organisations in the candidate countries and the need to ensure the functional participation civil society organisations in the new democracies are priorities that need to be addressed before any such debate can take place. Therefore, the civil society dialogue in the context of enlargement is neither the vertical consultative tool typical of the intra-EU discourses on civil society neither the horizontal facilitator of a trans-European public sphere deliberating enlargement. It is rather a capacity-building and elite-socialising tool that at best, will result in the creation of strong publics but not in
the creation of an integrated deliberative public sphere on enlargement as the tools are inadequate to exploit the deliberative potential of civil society organisations.

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