

Emre Gür* - 29 April 2025

How the Loss of Multilateralism Affects Civil Society: A Case From Türkiye

For years now we have been discussing the transformation to the new world order and the accompanying dangers facing multilateralism. With the election of Trump, the situation now seems much worse than we expected and we are now seeing the implications of this outcome in various fields, including the foreign aid sector.

Trump's latest decision to freeze foreign aid has had a substantial impact. But of course this move should not be interpreted as being solely based on financial bias. This trend of countries turning inward in recent years and moving away from multilateral cooperation has far-reaching implications.

As elaborated recently in a CIFE policy paper, the latest UN effort to restore multilateralism is also hanging in the balance, following several decisions by the new president of the USA, ie. withdrawing

from the Paris Agreement, the WHO and finally threatening the ICJ.

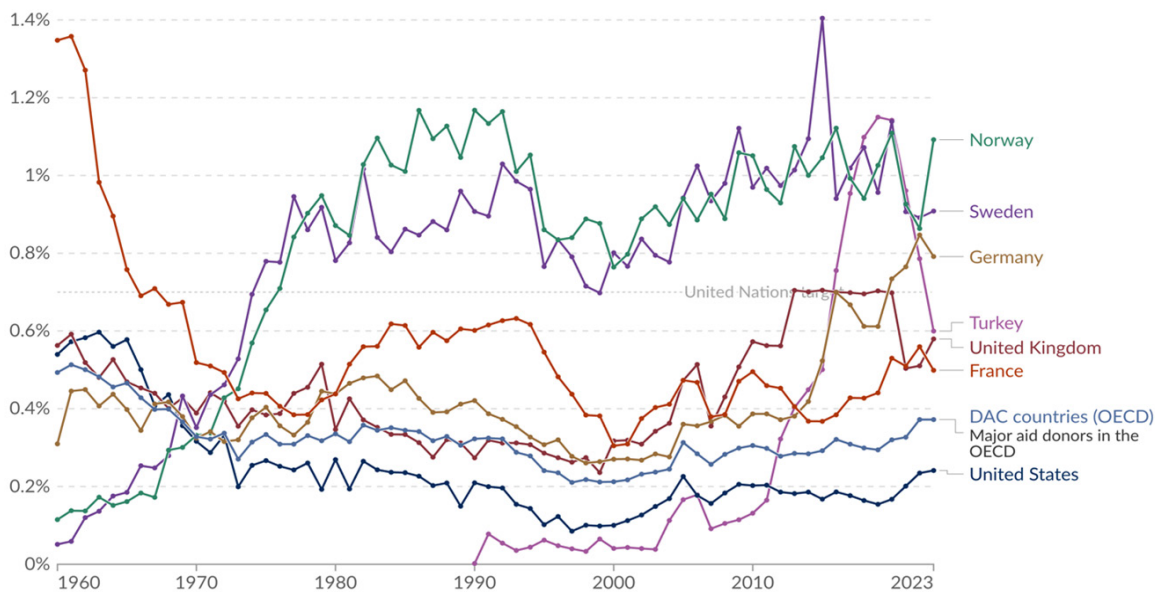
Foreign Aid, Where Does It Stand?

One of the first issues the Trump Administration dealt with after taking office was the sudden suspension of international foreign aid assistance for 90 days while the Elon Musk DOGE team was sent to USAID, a key contributor to US international cooperation policy, leaving thousands jobless and many projects null and void.¹ This process ended with Marc Rubio announcing the cancellation of 83% of programmes after a six-week review in a tweet in which he expressed his intention to manage the remaining ones through the State Department. Looking at the first figures, the US is, in fact, changing track, away from democracy and an aid structure anchored to

Foreign aid given as a share of national income



Official development assistance (ODA)¹ divided by gross national income. From 2018, the official reporting method switched from net² to grant-equivalent³ amounts.



Data source: OECD (2024)

OurWorldinData.org/foreign-aid | CC BY

Note: The United Nations' target is for developed countries to devote 0.7% of their national income to ODA.

1. **Official Development Assistance:** Financial flows from the Development Assistance Committee members (major donors in the OECD and EU institutions) to countries and territories on their list of recipients and to multilateral development institutions. These flows have to be provided by official agencies; serve the economic development and welfare of developing countries; and be concessional in character, with a grant element of at least 10-45 per cent, depending on the type of loan and the specific recipient.

2. **Net (official development assistance):** In official development assistance (ODA) statistics, "net" amounts mean that any money going out (like loan repayments or interest) has been subtracted from money coming in (like new grants or loans with favorable terms). Since more money can go out than comes in, net amounts can sometimes be negative.

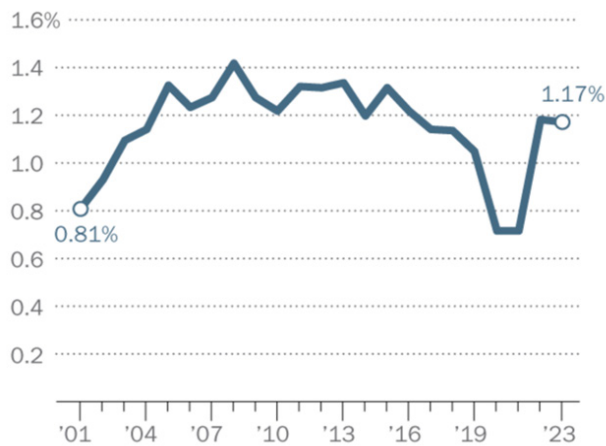
3. **Grant equivalents:** In official development assistance (ODA) statistics, "grant equivalent" is a methodology used to estimate the value of loans compared to a grant. It is an estimate, at today's value of money, of how much is being given away over the life of a financial transaction, compared with a transaction at market terms. This "gift", expressed as a percentage of the amount extended, is called grant element. Its value is regulated between different thresholds depending on the income category of the recipient country. By definition, grants have a grant element of 100%.

Table 1:
Place of US
ODA in the
world²

human rights to a Chinese style foreign aid approach that prioritises self-interest.

As Table 1 illustrates, even though the US is one of the biggest ODA contributors, the amount is not significant compared to its overall budget. Of course due to the overall size of GDP its contribution has been critical, especially for certain underfunded countries and areas where we have seen US intervention. In contrast China's contribution has increased substantially with its Belt and Road initiative. One thing to observe now is how this will affect the overall picture.

Foreign aid disbursements as a share of total federal expenses, by fiscal year



Source: ForeignAssistance.gov (accessed Jan. 28, 2025), Office of Management and Budget (accessed Jan. 29, 2025).

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Table 2: Foreign aid disbursements as share of total federal expenses in USA³

All in all, foreign assistance, and its implications, rest on a country's strategy and its priorities. The US, being one of the biggest hegemonic powers after a Cold War order, has not only served as the world's gendarmerie force but has also contributed largely to creating a world order in line with its own views through foreign assistance. The main issue now is not only the cutting of foreign aid per se - the critics of the president and its team maintain that the priorities are no longer the same. For instance, the targeting of the NED which has always enjoyed bipartisan support in the US with its promotion of democracy at the most critical junctures of the Cold War, took even those in Washington by surprise.⁴

Who Fills The Gap?

The US withdrawal not only from the field of aid, but also the transatlantic alliance, as indicated by the JD Vance speech at the Munich Security Conference, will have a substantial effect on the spending structure of European countries and other liberal democracies, that have so far relied on the NATO Security umbrella.

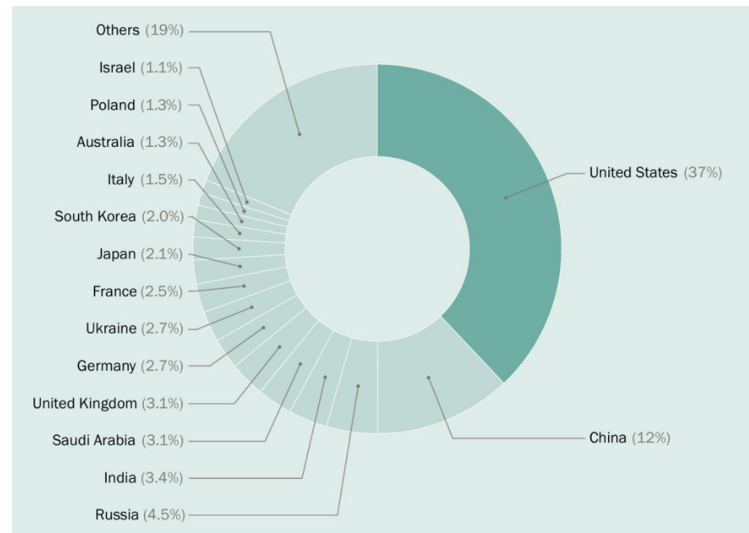


Table 3: The share of world military expenditure of the 15 countries with the highest spending in 2023; Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Apr. 2024.

In this illustration of the US military spending, the outlay for Ukraine is also included, for which we had a figure of around 35,7 billion USD of which 25,4 USD Billion came in the form of military aid. A good remaining amount of 10,3 billion USD includes funds to support European allies and US Command operations in Europe.⁵

The challenges of the expected gap in security funding is clearly one of the main concerns that will possibly shape how the ODA will be changing.

Government support to Ukraine: By country group, € billion



Allocations and commitments January 24, 2022 to December 31, 2024

■ Total allocated aid ■ Aid To be Allocated

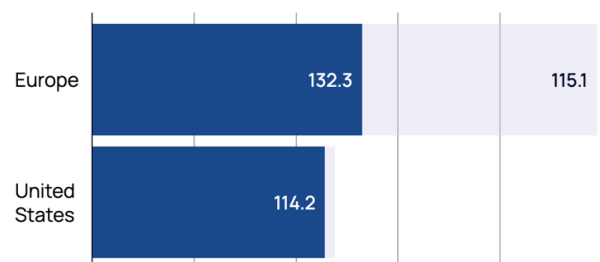


Table 4: Government support to Ukraine: By country groups, € billion
Source: Trebesch et al. (2023) "The Ukraine Support Tracker" Kiel WP

Even though the total spending of the USA is inferior to that of the EU, it is still a significant amount. And the latest meeting in Riyadh between Russia and the USA demonstrates that this will no longer be in place, creating another big gap to be filled by the EU.⁶

This all boils down to how the EU will respond as the biggest ODA donor alongside the USA. Calls from Civil Society Platforms⁷ have already been echoed in the more conservative section of the European policy framework, such as Hungarian President Orbán⁸, with his strong opposition to the EU filling this gap.

We should also note that in the last couple of years, EU foreign assistance and priorities have had to adapt to changes rather than following a real strategic approach. Of course it is not easy to keep up with a strategy when you are shaken by a series of events that affect you on a daily basis.

The loss of the UK contributions via Brexit has resulted in a serious loss to the EU budget, and altered the aid framework coordination just as the DFID is also adopting a different strategy. Leading contributors like Germany partially offset the gap in the EU budget. However, first, the influx of migrants during deteriorating economic conditions, and then the pandemic's impact on the welfare system in an aging demographic, exacerbated the situation. The war in Ukraine and neighboring regions prompted a shift in direction, requiring a substantial reprogramming of aid towards Ukraine and strategies for managing a new influx of migrants. Another example is the Dutch government stopping all funding for projects related to women's rights, gender equality, vocational and higher education and sports and culture, with important cuts expected in climate policy and governance and civil society.⁹

The Dutch foreign aid example clearly indicates the increasing complexity of the situation, as the EU aims to become more competitive while implementing its ambitious triple transition plan. Discussions have largely focused on enhancing Europe's competitiveness, as outlined in the Draghi report, which suggests the EU needs to generate 800 billion euros annually to compete with other global leaders.

Therefore, it is unlikely that the EU will allocate more resources to address this gap; it would be surprising if the EU even maintains its current funding levels.

Sustainability? No Perspective for Corporations to Step-In

With US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the EU remains the only party to have the means and willingness to keep up with international agreements and commitments, especially on sustainability.

The EU's competitiveness has been increasingly questioned since the Draghi report, and the shift towards a more competitive environment presents another challenge, as both states and corporations move away from sustainability commitments and ethical standards. However there is increasing criticism in terms of the competence of the legal challenges and regulations created by EU machinery and the challenges. To remain competitive, the EU is currently trying to ease some of the regulations and has already taken action with (revised) laws including those relating to the CSDR and CSDDD with the new Omnibus proposal.

Big corporations would always side with any change yielding more profits and not engage in any area that would do harm to business, especially in the age of techno-oligarchs. This is clearly evident in the way the so-called "big 7" shifted all the discourse as soon as Trump made his inaugural speech. Meta has suspended its third party fact checking programme and all corporation owners are now aligning with Trump's presidency.

The introduction of taxes is not the only issue. While we were discussing how important it is to have independent media, Elon Musk is now controlling all public debate on Twitter (now known as X). Bezos is making clear his investment into the Washington Post will bring about an "editorial change", not to mention google changing the name of the Gulf of Mexico to Gulf of America as a good example of a post-truth world.

But these signs are not only highlighting a political change, they also indicate how all sustainability policies and measures that have been introduced so far will be seriously affected.

Despite all scientific progress in this area, Trump has signed a presidential decree on a return to plastics, and many policies are moving towards the refueling of corporations. The way forward is increasing investment and incentivizing fossil fuel based sectors,

creating a wilder system in which environmental perspectives and human rights are no longer favoured.

Therefore corporations are not only expected to withdraw from sustainability practices but will also no longer be offering any aid to bridge any funding gap.

Civil Society

With this funding gap, the challenge for civil society is greater than ever. Not only will it be crucial to find the necessary resources to operate in a highly demanding and competitive environment, but the ability to operate will also be hindered more than ever in a restricted political environment.

In a world of VUCA civil society is very open to different risks and current mechanisms of support are not well enough equipped to answer the needs of civil society and its constituency. Dependency on public funding in many spheres has reduced flexibility and resilience while the withdrawal of other resources has also left no room for any transition period.

That leaves civil society with a very difficult choice, either becoming the agency of the hegemonic structure or seek alternatives that could lead to their survival. With regard to the latter, I will try to explore possibilities later but in terms of the former, the perspectives are, again, limited.

The new conservative tendency, not only in the USA, but also in other countries that it dominates is fixated on migration control and prioritises national interests. The only area that most states are willing to fund now is anti-immigration policy. As UN agencies are unpopular with the current Trump administration, it is likely that part of this process will be led by NGOs in this specific field.

However, these NGOs are unlikely to be those with strong human rights values.

Case Study: Türkiye and a Possible Grim Future for Civil Society

Türkiye was once a promising EU Candidate accelerating towards democratisation and attracting funding from various channels. Strengthening liberal democracy also resulted in increased and diverse civil society support, that kept up the momentum of international engagement.

In the 2000s, a strengthened civil society was further highlighted after the organisation of the Habitat congress in İstanbul with a lot more engagement and dissemination, accompanied by reforms required for EU accession.

This revitalisation, however, did not lead to a speedy institutionalisation as most CSOs were reliant on externally funded projects. If you extract religious associations, service providing and emergency aid associations, a good number of CSOs remain resourceless, and without EU funding. According to a study by TUSEV: close to 95% lack full-time staff and their average annual budget is no higher than 2500€.

EU funding for Turkish CSOs was quite popular during their growth phase, while they were willing to engage globally and extend their activities. Then Türkiye was again one of the first countries to experience political turmoil and move towards conservatism on the periphery of Europe that intensified after each political event, the Gezi protests, an attempted coup d'Etat, etc. The final result was a further distancing from the western liberal democracies, causing a loss of momentum and a gradual loss of cooperation.

The efforts towards cooperation that were incentivised by the 2015 Civil Society Facility agreement, aligned with the EU-Türkiye immigration agreement, remained a notable exception. Yet in 2018 there was a serious shift when the EU terminated the indirect support mechanism that gives support to civil society via government institutions. Since then, sectoral cooperation and financial agreements continue under the IPA III in a similar phase but funding remains uncertain and limited.

EU financing of Türkiye's refugee programmes following the Syrian crisis has now reached €12,5 billion compared to a consolidated number of € 6 billion over a similar time frame. This reinforces public perceptions that the only interest the EU and USA have in Türkiye is confined to Syrian immigration containment rather than being a cooperation partner.

Current planning for Civil Society Support under the EU Civil Society Facility for the period 2026-2027 is up and coming, and according to the presentations made in the current consultation programme, a package of 50 m € will be allocated to two main priority areas, namely; to strengthen those civil society organisations that work for human rights and the protection of basic rights (38m€) and to support

media organisations' diversity and independence along with their governance and production quality (12m€).

However, given Türkiye's average inflation rate of over 50% in the last couple of years, coupled with the treasury's currency policy that keeps foreign currencies at a lower level, real-term funding value is actually declining.

Any new funding related to human rights is particularly problematic. And if we leave EU financing out of this framework, the sheer gravity of the situation becomes clear. The human rights and civil society sector is not a heavily invested area. Apart from the EU, another very important donor was SIDA. In this current political environment the quasi-withdrawal of SIDA in 2024 was a second blow to several CSOs that have contributed to Türkiye's democratisation. The reason for this move was not so clear, but it shouldn't have come as a surprise, since SIDA's withdrawal came right after Sweden's NATO negotiations. A good number of gender equality, democracy and human rights programmes/organisations are no longer operating due to this cut in funding.

US withdrawal was the another important event, not in terms of budget as USAID operations were not highly funded and were limited to the area of migration and mostly operated by US Agencies. US engagement had been symbolically significant, since bilateral relations were at an important crossroads. Bilateral public policy programmes and cultural exchange programmes were quite successful in terms of engaging a turkish audience and so withdrawal had the indirect effect of stopping NED and NDI programmes in Türkiye, affecting many NGOs in the field of democracy and human rights.

Finally it turns out that the EU remains Türkiye's main international civil society resource. Financial cooperation is still continuing on a large scale, albeit with its own challenges;

- Inflation erodes the financing of projects with the increase in the Euro compared to local currency, leaving many projects uncompetitive in terms of their operation,
- Very limited staff available to deal with a big number of projects effect programming and implementation timelines, as well as quality of operations,

- Switch to financial support to Third Party (FSTP) due to resource constraints, eliminating mid-level grants and finances leaves little room for action,

- Uncertainty of relations between the EU & Türkiye making some of the operations hard to implement and subject to political deliberations (eg. tax exemptions, budget reallocations/ increases).

Conclusions

The evolving world order; will impact not only states, people, corporations but all institutions, including civil society. A key element of governance, respect for human rights, the very existence of civil society is reliant on public funding, particularly in the emerging and least developed countries. This funding can no longer be relied on, especially after the change to the Trump administration.

This leaves many professionals, volunteers and civil society actors in constant limbo between their existential aims and the dwindling funding/resource opportunities? that we have long been discussing in the sustainability of civil society debate.

A good lesson to be learnt here going forward is to diversify funding sources and rely less on public funding or at least reduce dependency on single donors. While there is a good amount of literature that initiated this discussion, it now looks like this topic is set to become the top priority for all leaders in this area. It is also the responsibility of all those who believe in the future of human rights and a world order based on rule of law, to bring about a fair transition.

A potential way forward could be the recently announced EU Civil Society Strategy which appears in the 2025 work plan of European Commission. If this strategy follows calls from leading CSOs in the EU¹⁰, that might not only contribute to the improvement of the current conditions of the civil society but also align EU's overall global strategy with a better cooperation framework. Engagement of enlargement countries to this process will also play an important role, for its further engagement with civil society in these countries like Türkiye.

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