Civil Society Organizations in the Hybrid Regime of Nicaragua

Challenging or Maintaining the Status Quo?
International Civil Society

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Civil Society Organizations in the Hybrid Regime of Nicaragua

Challenging or Maintaining the Status Quo?

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1. Introduction

»The question of the circumstances under which civil mobilization fosters a more or less democratic outcome is still unresolved. On the one hand a vital civil society is a precondition of the effective democratic government, yet, on the other, a flourishing associational life does not necessarily provide support for democracy. Energies generated by civic activism do not of necessity feed into a politics of tolerance and inclusion but may just as well be utilized for repressive end. Civic mobilization is also capable of fragmenting societies into different pillars or milieus.« (Reichardt 2004: 47)

1.1 Motivation

Recently, the study of so-called hybrid regimes has been gaining momentum within democratization studies. Four decades after the outbreak of the »third wave of democratization« (Huntington 1991), the initial optimism and euphoria about a worldwide victory of democracy (see Fukuyama 1989) have given way to a new skepticism among scholars and politicians alike. The transitologists of the 1980s – inspired by the upheavals in Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America or South East Asia – believed in the worldwide »feasibility« (Rüb 2002: 93) of democracy and its future linear and inevitable evolution. Today, however, most of these third wave countries indeed seem to have successfully developed formal democratic structures, but the majority of them show deficits concerning the realization of political or civil liberties and the rule of law (Croissant 2002: 32). In the 21st century, these former autocratic states face more or less free and fair elections, they show diverse types of political parties, and have a democratic constitutional framework. At the same time, however, they are suffering from clientelist or patrimonial legacies, politicized judiciaries, weak oppositional forces or censorship. In practice, legitimately elected representatives may lack effective power to act or may face the undue power of non-elected actors. (Ekman 2009, Levitsky / Way 2002)

This hybrid coexistence of usually formal democratic structures with autocratic legacies was first been referred to by Karl who wrote about the »Hybrid Regimes of Central America« (Karl 1995) in 1995. Since then, scholars have struggled with how to classify and where to place these ambiguous regime structures on the traditional continuum between authori-
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Furthermore, the evasive use of the term hybrid regimes obfuscates the discourse. In scholarly and public debate, it is applied to a diverse range of countries in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America – always denoting ambiguous regime structures that exhibit a mixture of both authoritarian and democratic features. Since its emergence, the topic has gained a lot of theoretical reflection as well as statistical reverberation within indices of democracy and democratization. New conceptualizations and inventions of terms that range from »delegative« (O’Donnell 1994) to »illiberal« (Zakaria 1997) or »defective« democracy (Merkel 2003), to »semi-authoritarianism« (Ottaway 2003) or »liberalized autocracy« (Brumberg 2002) paved the way for an ongoing discussion about hybrid regimes as a specific, proliferating regime type of the 21st century (Diamond 2002, Morlino 2009, Wigell 2008). Nonetheless, there is still a lack of qualitative approaches focusing on the practical arrangement of regime-hybridity and its presumed future development. Today, the most urgent desiderata in research on hybrid regimes concern the reasons for their stability and persistence and the further exploration of possible factors (and actors) of change.

Against this background, civil society organizations (CSOs) appear as potentially crucial but so far little-explored actors in hybrid regime settings. Since its revival in the 1980s, the concept of civil society has gained attention from scholars and the public alike (Anheier et al 2010, Cohen / Arato 1994, Foley / Edwards 1996, Keane 1988, Putnam 1993). The interest has resulted in some confusion and blurring definitions. Civil society can broadly be defined as a sphere between the market, the state, and the private, characterized by charity, self-organization, autonomy, openness, and pluralism (Kocka 2004). At the heart of this concept, we can find CSOs with their outright reputation as agents of change. The term CSO explicitly refers to the organizational level and embraces a wide array of actors including sports clubs, associations, charity foundations, trade unions, or professional and transnationally operating NGOs. From a neo-Tocquevillian perspective, they dispose of certain democratic-

1 Non-governmental organizations
2 Referring to Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) and his still popular conceptualization of civil society, based on his studies on »Democracy in America« (De Tocqueville 1985).
1.1 Motivation

participatory functions that enable them to depict and question nondemocratic practices or setbacks to raise awareness for rights and liberties and enhance civic engagement.

The concept of civil society in its current understanding and predominant usage is, however, inevitably linked to the idea of liberal democracy (Zinecker 2011: 6). Even more, there is a mutual dependence. Our Western liberal democracies benefit from the organizational infrastructure based on self-organization and local civic engagement. Likewise, CSOs depend on the liberties and possibilities associated with a consolidated democratic context including the freedoms of association and opinion, the protection by and from the state, and the indisputable superiority of the rule of law.

Nonetheless, despite this apparent intrinsic link between CSOs and democracy, recent empirical research documents the existence of CSOs in all kinds of political contexts. Particularly the development of international Third-Sector Research since the 1970s has fostered the study of civil society sectors in all parts of the world (Etzioni 1973, Salamon / Anheier 1992, 1997). Against this background, scholars have expressed the need to reassess the theoretical concept of civil society, to free it from its Western bias, and to make it applicable to political contexts other than democracy (Lauth 1999, Zinecker 2011). Altogether, the study of CSOs as potential but hitherto neglected actors in hybrid regimes pledges new and original findings for the research on civil society and democratization studies. Firstly, given their participatory-democratic functions, CSOs seem predestined to bring about change and close the gap between formal democratic structures and autocratic setbacks. Secondly, a critical discourse concerning independent civic organization seems to be characteristic of many hybrid regimes (Ekman 2009: 7, referring to Carothers 2006: 55f). Thirdly, a hybrid regime context is also likely to reflect a superficial understanding and arbitrary appreciation of liberties and democratic values among the population itself.

Against this background, this thesis focuses on CSOs as potential actors in the area of conflict between democratic and autocratic structures, exploring their potentials, functions, and challenges in a hybrid regime context. Centering on a qualitative case study of CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua, it tries to bring together current questions from the fields of democratization studies and civil society research – contributing to fill the outlined research gaps at the intersection of both disciplines.
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1.2 Research questions and objectives

The overall research interest of this thesis lies in CSOs and their potential to bring about change in a hybrid regime setting. Given their implicit democratic-participatory functions and their reputation as agents of change, are CSOs able to contribute to closing the critical gap between formal democracy and autocratic practices? Does a diverse and numerically strong CSO sector automatically further democratic consolidation in a hybrid regime context by serving as a watchdog to the state, depicting autocratic drawbacks, representing the people’s interests, and promoting overall democratic values? Alternatively, might CSOs strengthen the stability and persistence of a hybrid regime given their possible deep or historical embeddedness in the country’s institutional framework, through cooptation by state officials and elites, through their own anti-democratic tendencies or as mere service deliverers?

Drawing on this controversial but so far understudied topic, this thesis forwards an explorative approach centering on the single case of Nicaragua. The following sub-questions structured the empirical field study carried out between June and September 2013 based in the country’s capital Managua.

- RQ 1: How do hybrid regime structures become manifest in Nicaragua?
- RQ 2: Which particular challenges and frame conditions result for CSOs in the given context?
- RQ 3: Which different groups of actors characterize the Nicaraguan CSO sector?
- RQ 4: How can we classify the sector with a view to its ability to bring about change in the hybrid regime context?

Altogether, these questions inform the overall research interest: CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua – challenging or maintaining the status quo?

The objective of this thesis is to provide exploratory insights into CSOs and regime-hybridity for the selected case of Nicaragua. Nonetheless, the findings may also inspire analytic generalizations on the general challenges, potentials, and interdependencies of CSOs and a hybrid regime context. With this, the thesis contributes to close existing research gaps at the intersection of both democratization studies and civil society research by complementing the study of CSOs in political contexts other than democ-
1.3 Methods and case selection

To address the explorative research interest best, this thesis reverts to a qualitative research design centering on the single case of Nicaragua.

Trying to avoid an a priori exclusion of practically existing actors that do not fit into the dominant Western liberal concept of civil society, it draws on a broad but down-to-earth understanding of CSOs typical in nonprofit sector studies, considering civil society as neither »bound to democracy« (Zinecker 2011: 6) nor inherently good, charitable, and pro-democratic (Zinecker 2011: 6f). Tying in with narrow conceptualizations of hybrid regimes as a regime type »sui generis« (Morlino 2009, Rüb 2002), hybrid regimes are defined as marked by three criteria: their evolution in the third wave of democratization (context), an ambiguous political nature combining formal democratic features with autocratic practices (features), and their non-transitional character due to their persistence and stability over time (perspective).

The thesis does not attempt statistical quantification of pre-formulated hypotheses but opts for a qualitative analysis of a single case to get insight into a relatively unexplored field of research. The case study design provides the opportunity to get in-depth findings on the Nicaraguan CSO sector and its position in the hybrid regime setting which in the end have to be checked on their generalizability and explanatory power for other cases (Yin 2012: 4f).

Nicaragua was selected as a case as it belongs to the Central American headland, a region characterized by many hybrid regimes (Karl 1995). The country, as nearly all of its neighboring states, started democratization in the 1980s and has since then struggled to consolidate. Current President Daniel Ortega is especially well-known for having »walked a tightrope between democracy and autocracy, tolerating a democratic system and its institutions while seeking to acquire as much power as possible« (Anderson / Dodd 2009: 157).

The empirical study was divided into two parts, a background study (part 1) and supplementary interviews with leaders of selected CSOs (part 2). The background study served to explore the particular context of civic organization, referring to the practical arrangement of regime-hybridity in Nicaragua and its general implications for the CSO sector. It is based on
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19 expert interviews conducted with Nicaraguan scholars, journalists, representatives from foreign donor organizations, and CSO leaders themselves. In addition, background information on the country’s democratic development and the CSO sector was gathered through a literature review. In the second part of the study, findings were then to be complemented by an analysis of the specific features of the Nicaraguan CSO sector and its central actors. Based on the preliminary results, three samples of CSOs were selected and 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with their representatives and additional material\(^3\) was collected for further information. The focus in the interviews was on the organizations’ evolution, their members, their motivation, their self-perception as CSOs, their particular agenda, and their evaluation of the present political context. This second part of the study served to refine the classification of the Nicaraguan CSO sector and the different groups’ embeddedness, positioning, and functions in the hybrid regime setting including their ability to bring about (democratic) change in the present status quo.

The interview transcripts and documents were analyzed based on qualitative content analysis and with support from the CAQDAS software package MAXQDA (see also methods chapter).

1.4 Roadmap

As illustrated in figure 1 this thesis splits into three major parts.

The introductory part starts with outlining central theoretical considerations at the intersection of democratization studies and research on civil society, including the research desiderata that informed the overall research question. Chapter 2 sketches the state of the scholarly debate on hybrid regimes, the central features ascribed to hybrid regimes, and their proliferation and empirical evidence in democratic indices. Tying in with the outlined research desiderata, it then brings in CSOs as a potential but paradox actor in nondemocratic settings. Based on the so far only scarcely explored research field, the chapter presents three approaches rooted in different disciplines that broach the question of CSOs in nondemocratic regimes. A synthesis concludes the theoretical background that informs the following analysis of CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua.

\(^3\) E.g. promotional material provided by the organizations under study.
Chapter 3 sketches the selected research design centered on a qualitative case study. It outlines concepts and terms within the area of qualitative research and illustrates the two-part study undertaken in Nicaragua between June and September 2013. Subsequently the central methods of data collection (semi-structured interviews) and data analysis (qualitative content analysis) are refined.

Figure 1: Outline of the thesis

Completing this introductory part of the thesis, chapter 4 serves as a short introduction to the case of Nicaragua. The chapter sketches the historical development of democratic structures up to the characteristics of the present political system. Furthermore it describes the evolution of the Nicaraguan CSO sector, the legal framework of civic organization, and the sector’s general characteristics.

The main part of the thesis embraces chapters 5 to 7 that present the results of the case study structured by the research questions (RQ 1 - 4). Chapter 5 describes the findings for the practical manifestation of hybrid regime structures in Nicaragua in the present context. Complementing existing approaches it distinguishes between a political, a socio-economic, and a socio-cultural dimension of regime-hybridity.

Chapter 6 presents the resulting challenges for CSOs, again distinguishing between political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural implications.
1. Introduction

These range from the Nicaraguan government’s diverse set of strategies to control the Nicaraguan CSO sector to the difficulties arising from the sector’s historical dependency on international support to deficits inherent to the capabilities and expertise of the sector itself.

Chapter 7 finally classifies the sector into three wings, a group of critical CSOs, a group of rather de-political CSOs, and one of party-loyal organizations. Based on the interviews led in the second part of the study, it comparatively contraposes their evolution, central members and objectives, their understanding of civil society, their perception of challenges, and strategic positioning in the present regime context.

Chapters 8 and 9 build the concluding part of the thesis. The discussion of results merges the theoretical discourses outlined in chapter 2 with the proper empirical findings. It discusses the pressures that impact the Nicaraguan CSO sector in the present context, analyzes the three groups’ resulting strengths and weaknesses, and builds up an a (functional) typology of CSOs and their potential to challenge the status quo in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua.

The conclusion in chapter 9 summarizes the results, critically reflects the research process and remaining desiderata, and provides an outlook on the country’s future perspectives.
2. Theoretical considerations

The research interest of this thesis correlates approaches from democratization studies with research on civil society. The following chapters draw on both research fields to summarize the present state of the art on hybrid regimes (2.1) and civil society organizations (2.2). Subsequently, a synthesis of existing research gaps and definitions completes the theoretical background necessary to analyze CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua (2.3).

2.1 Hybrid regimes (democratization studies)

»In the wake of the global wave of democratization, a wide array of new political regimes has emerged. Despite important steps towards more democratic politics, it has become clear that many of these new political regimes in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the former Communist world differ profoundly both from each other and from the older western democracies. To differing extents, these regimes combine democratic features with authoritarian practices placing them in a grey zone between closed authoritarianism and liberal democracy. A central question in comparative politics has become how to classify these hybrid regimes.« (Wigell 2008: 230)

Hybrid regimes which, broadly spoken, combine autocratic and democratic features can be found throughout history (Diamond 2002: 23). Still, the term in its present understanding is strongly connected to research on the so-called third wave of democratization (Huntington 1993) and incomplete democratic consolidation processes started since 1974. In the past decades, worldwide developments have questioned traditional regime dichotomies and inspired research on the different quality of democracies and other regime types (Bendel 2002, Collier / Levitsky 1997, Diamond 2002, Merkel et al 2003, 2006, Karl 1995). Against this background, the current debate about hybrid regimes has to be seen as a result of general transformations within the field of democratization studies.

Chapter 2.1.1 starts with classifying the discourse about hybrid regimes as a result of ongoing developments in the area of democratization studies in consequence of worldwide political transformations since the 1970s.

Subsequently, chapter 2.1.2 tries to define hybrid regimes as a regime type sui generis by drawing on their most prominent features; their origin
2. Theoretical considerations

in the third wave transitions, their ambiguous political nature, and their stability and persistence. Chapter 2.1.3 explores the proliferation of hybrid regimes taking into account major democratic indices. Finally, concluding considerations about potential factors and actors likely to bring about regime change build a bridge to the next chapter on civil society organizations (2.1.4).

2.1.1 The debate

This chapter traces the discourse about hybrid regimes seen as a result of growing disillusions in democratization studies concerning the outcome of the third wave transformations and the global triumph of Western liberal democracy.

2.1.1.1 From a bipolar world order …

The study of democracy, its values, and possible designs has occupied mankind since modernity. Moreover, it has always been a mirror of the respective political context. Since the end of the Second World War, political reality promoted the empirical study of democracy, its causes of origin, threats and future perspectives. Since then, researchers’ focuses have shifted over time and in response to the development of world politics and democratization processes worldwide.

After the Second World War, political science was strongly influenced by the previous war experiences and the emerging Cold War conflict. Regarding the former fascist powers Germany, Japan and Italy and in the face of a growing ideological division of the world, researchers on democracy (Lipset 1959, Moore 1966, Parsons 1951) were interested in the socio-economic, structural or historical preconditions of democracy (Grugel 2002: 46ff, Merkel 2010: 67ff). Throughout these decades, dichotomous regime typologies differentiating between democratic and nondemocratic regimes, usually referred to as »totalitarian«, were prominent and sufficient for many researchers in the view of political reality (Linz 2009: 5).

In the wake of the authoritarian backlashes of the 1960s and 1970s, researchers’ attention shifted towards the causes and dynamics of »The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes« (Linz / Stepan 1978) (Croissant 2002b: 10). The proliferation of military rule – even in the former model
democracies in Latin America together with the persistence of dictatorships in Southern Europe – advanced research on nondemocratic regimes. Moreover, it led to further differentiation and forwarded the conceptualization of authoritarian regimes between the totalitarian and the democratic end (Linz 2009: 5f). Building on the example of the Franco regime in Spain, Juan Linz defined authoritarian regimes through restricted pluralism, the lack of a deeply formulated ideology, and neither «extensive nor intensive political mobilization» (Linz 1975: 264, cited from Linz 1964: 255). In comparison, totalitarian regimes are characterized by a monistic center of power, an exclusive ideology, and extensive political mobilization (Linz 2009: 25). Linz’ considerations have been seminal for the classic regime typology distinguishing between democratic, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes that remains prominent until today.4

Concerning a more elaborate approach to democracy, Robert Dahl (Dahl 1956, 1971) set standards with his work on »polyarchic democracies«. Dahl adjusts his conceptualizations on the »average type of actual existing democracies« (Merkel 2010a: 29f), compared to a to his mind unachievable normative model of democracy (Pickel / Pickel 2006: 163). His definition of polyarchy centers on the keywords of participation and competition, and – despite its rather theoretical approach – has defined standards for measuring democracy valid until today. His criteria include the presence of active and passive suffrage, the freedoms of opinion, information, and association as well as free and fair elections (Pickel / Pickel 2006: 164ff). Dahl’s approach to democracy exceeds minimalistic conceptualizations (e.g., Schumpeter 19435) but still stays far behind the by that time emerging more ambitious or normative conceptualizations of democracy.

The rise of social movements and societal upheavals even in the established democracies in the 1960s and 1970s generated a further debate on

4 At the same time, they paved the way for more elaborated typologies as his work already includes a discourse on sultanistic regimes, further specified in Chehabi / Linz 1998.

5 Joseph A. Schumpeter, a political scientist and economist who in his seminal work on »Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy« (first published in 1943) defined democracy as »institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.« (Schumpeter 2003: 269)
the advancement of democracy. Despite all differences, they shared a
deeper understanding of democracy apart from constitutional structures
and promoted different ideas of how the people’s will should be
materialized. As summed up by Grugel (Grugel 2002: 23ff) researchers
questioned representative structures claiming »participatory democracy«
(see Macpherson 1977), feminists criticized a gender-bias in democratic
theory (see Pateman 1988) while cosmopolitanists called for a
globalization of democracy (see Held 1995).

All in all, approaches to regime typologies in the first decades after
1945 were strongly marked by the world’s ideological dichotomy (or tri-
chotomy) and the dominance of modern political science in the West. Eu-
ropean and American democracies set the standards for the conceptualiza-
tion of democracy while the fascist and communist totalitarian experiences
in Germany or the Soviet Union served as models of nondemocratic re-
gimes. Democracy was believed to be bound on a particular regional con-
text and culture. However, these assumptions were going to be challenged
by the kickoff of democratization processes all over the world from the
mid-1970s on. These transformations had started with the end of
dictatorial rule in Southern Europe, continued with the breakdown of
military dictatorships in various Latin American countries, and spread to
South-East Asia to culminate in the fall of the Iron Curtain and democratic
transformations in Eastern Europe (Nagle 1999: 8). The developments,
later labeled »third wave« of democratization by Samuel Huntington
(Huntington 1991), revitalized scientific debate and shifted the attention
towards actors, elites, pacts, and institutions. The study of the transition to
democracy became the major ambition of these new agency approaches
sometimes even called »transitology« (Grugel 2002: 56ff). Research on
the third wave went along with a new optimism about the »feasibility« of
democracy (Rüb 2002: 93) as worldwide democratic transformations even
in the most digressive regions seemed to show that »anyone can do it«
(Carothers 2002: 8). Transitologists, first and foremost O’Donnell et al in
their seminal volumes on the »Transitions from Authoritarian Rule«
(O’Donnell / Schmitter / Whitehead 1986) argued that earlier approaches
had overvalued the importance of socio-economic or historical factors for
the success of democratization (Grugel 2002: 57). Particularly the
transformations in Eastern Europe and the foreseeable end of the Cold
War led to widespread euphoria. This enthusiasm is most prominently
typified by Francis Fukuyama’s prediction on »The End of History«
(Fukuyama 1989) and the global triumph of democracy:
2.1 Hybrid regimes (democratization studies)

»What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such, that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government« (Fukuyama 1989: 1).

Nonetheless, from today’s point of view, the time passed since the changing of world order in 1989/90 and ongoing events in world history seem to have contested Fukuyama’s predictions. Moreover, they brought about new challenges for researchers on democratization, as they put into question many of their traditional assumptions and established regime typologies.

2.1.1.2 … to democracy with adjectives …

By the early 1990s, worldwide developments and particularly trends and progression in the former third wave countries challenged existing assumptions and approaches within democratization studies. Scholars began to question the optimistic view on the prospects of democratization propagated by the transitologists and instigated a new thinking about democratic gray zones and ambiguous regimes (Bogaards 2009: 399). In fact, many of the transformation processes which started in the 1970s did not come out as hoped for and researchers on democratization had to admit that some of their main assumptions had proved wrong. In particular, the simple understanding of democratization as a linear development »from non-democracy towards accountable and representative government« (Grugel 2002: 3) proved untenable. After all, not every country striking the path to democracy would automatically and quickly become a liberal democracy. Instead, most of the countries which had brought down autocratic rulers after decades of dictatorship and repression since the 1970s now showed severe difficulties and even setbacks in consolidating democratic structures (O’Donnell 1994, Zakaria 1997, Collier / Levitsky 1997, Lauth 1997, Merkel 2003). While most had been quite quick in the formation of formal democratic structures and institutions, they showed significant deficits regarding political liberties, civic rights or the rule of law (Croissant 2002b: 32). From delegative elements characteristic of many South American countries to the dominance of military and violent groups in Central America or the survival of neopatrimonial structures on the African continent – democratic consolidation did not seem to be within reach in the near future. In fact, few consolidated democracies had been built, while a wide array of coun-
tries seemed to »remain stuck in some middle hybrid terrain« (Karl 1995: 73). As a consequence, the decade following the end of the Cold War bore a new interest in democracies »with adjectives« (Collier / Levitsky 1997).

In 1994, O’Donnell initiated the discussion in a Journal of Democracy article elaborating on a »new species« he called »delegative democracy« (O’Donnell 1994). Referring to the example of many Latin American countries, he states that these delegative democracies:

»rest on the premise that whoever wins election to the presidency is thereby entitled to govern as he or she sees fit, constrained only by the hard facts of existing power relations and by a constitutionally limited term of office« (O’Donnell 1994: 59).

More precisely, once elected an omnipotent president is able to rule more or less irrespective of democratic institutions or organized interests in a system that lacks horizontal accountability and condemns the people to a »passive but cheering audience« (O’Donnell 1994: 60).

One year later, Karl first used the term »hybrid regime« referring to the post-war states of Central America. These, since the beginning of democratization a decade earlier she considered to have remained stuck between authoritarian rule and consolidated democracy (Karl 1995: 73). For her, hybrid regimes are characterized by »mixes of authoritarianism, clientelism, and pluralism« coexisting »under the same national regime« (Karl 1995: 80).

In 1997, Zakaria criticized »The Rise of Illiberal Democracy« (Zakaria 1997). He referred to the array of young democratic regimes whose leaders although democratically elected exploit, centralize and abuse power or rule against ethnic minorities. For Zakaria, the characteristic feature of these illiberal democracies is their lack of constitutional liberalism. To his mind, the new leaders often lack »concern for constitutional procedure and limits« (Zakaria 1997: 34) posing a threat not only to their country but to the whole world. As a consequence, he urges the international community to pursue not only democracy but the spread of constitutional liberalism to »make democracy safe for the world« (Zakaria 1997: 43).

At the beginning of the new century, Lauth / Merkel elaborated their concept of »defective democracy« (Lauth 1997, Merkel et al 2003, Croissant / Merkel (eds.) 2004). The authors develop their typology of defective democracies as a diminished subtype of democracy on a root concept called »embedded democracy«. According to their understanding, stable constitutional democracies consist of partial regimes, i.e. the electoral regime, political rights, civil liberties, horizontal accountability, and the effective power to govern. Based on this root concept, they make
out three, later four diminished subtypes – exclusive, illiberal, delegative, and tutelary or domain democracy. Consecutively, the concept served as a basis for several case studies trying to illustrate the features and problems of defective democracy in selected countries in Latin America, East Asia or Eastern Europe (Merkel et al 2006, Croissant 2002a, 2004, Mangott 2002, Croissant / Merkel (eds.) 2004).

The whole discussion about »democracies with adjectives« (Collier / Levitsky 1997) has best been summarized by Collier and Levitsky’s correspondent article on the variety of upcoming concepts. The authors allude to the risk of conceptual confusion or stretching due to an explosion of newly invented terms. While analyzing the different ways researchers have taken to describe the emerging new democracies – e.g. »creating diminished subtypes of democracy« or »precising the definition of democracy by adding defining attributes« (Collier / Levitsky 1997: 431) – the authors give an overview of the hitherto existing concepts. In the literature up to the end of the 1990s, they detect a magnitude of terms and conceptualizations ranging from »protected«, »tutelary«, »restrictive« or »de facto one-party« to »male«, »oligarchical« or »controlled« - democracies.

Next to these general theoretical-conceptual approaches, the conceptual confusion was intensified through area-specific debates. These – often highly politicized – for example referred to the dangers of low-intensity democracy in Latin America, the challenges of post-communist democracies in Eastern Europe or the existence of a particular type of »Asian democracy« (for an overview see Gills / Rocamora 1992, Mukherjee 2010). Altogether, this occupation with »possible varieties of democracy« (Nagle / Mahr 1999: 12) dominant in the 1990s was later labeled »consolidology« (Croissant / Merkel 2004: 2). In the new millennium, worldwide developments have not contributed to completely resolve this »Babel in Democratization Studies« (Armony / Scharmis 2005) but given way to an ever more critical discourse.

Carothers’ essay on »The End of the Transition Paradigm« (Carothers 2002) opened up a »new pessimism« (Rüb 2002: 93) in democratization studies. Carothers claims to break with traditional assumptions in the field of democratic assistance based on the transition paradigm which to his mind has »outlived its usefulness« (Carothers 2002: 6). He states that classic assumptions – from the general idea that »any country moving away from dictatorial rule can be considered a country in transition toward democracy« (Carothers 2002: 6) – to the linear understanding of democratization, the importance of founding elections, the
underestimation of context and the supposition of »coherent, functioning states« (Carothers 2002: 8) no longer reflects the present reality of democratization processes. Instead, to his mind, research on democratization has to adapt to the fact that most of the transitional countries of the third wave have neither reached nor are heading for democratic consolidation (Carothers 2002: 9).

Consecutively, there has been a regained interest in authoritarianism and autocratic structures (e.g. Brooker 2000, Diamond 2008). Researchers now started to focus on authoritarianism as a root concept in the analysis of political regimes (see Levitsky / Way 2002, 2010, Ottaway 2003, Schedler 2006, Gilbert / Mohseni 2011). As a reaction to the debate in the 1990s these authors make out an »authoritarianism with adjectives« (Gilbert / Mohseni 2011: 275) – labelled as »competitive« (Levitsky / Way 2002&2010, Howard / Roessler 2006), »electoral« (Schedler 2006) or »semi-authoritarianism« (Ottaway 2003) or even »liberalized autocracy« (Brumberg 2002). Amongst others, Levitsky and Way (Levitsky / Way 2002: 52) criticize the analyses of third wave countries »in terms of transitions to democracy« as »overly optimistic« and pledge for an examination as diminished forms of authoritarianism because a clear progression towards democratization is not observable in many cases. They already use the term hybrid regime to denote a particular regime type between »full-scale authoritarianism« (Levitsky / Way 2002: 53) and real democracy – referring to regimes which are overly autocratic, but may show different arenas of contestation (electoral, legislative, judicial, the media).

2.1.1.3 … towards hybrid regimes

In the last years, the growing disillusion with the outcome of various democratization processes has not only furthered interest in autocracy. In fact, it finally kicked off interest in hybrid regimes as a single regime type dominant in the 21st century.

regime type to avoid a further stretching of the existing concepts. They take such diverse countries as Colombia, Turkey, Tanzania, Russia, Venezuela, Nepal, Uganda, Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia or Kirgizstan as examples. The term hybrid regime is used as a broad classification still allowing for subtypes and further categories. The authors tend to take up multidimensional approaches; their analyses go far beyond the traditional focus on a regime’s degree of democratic consolidation or authoritarian traits (horizontal dimension) but attempt to find out how regimes are “differently democratic” (Wigell 2008: 231). This vertical analytic dimension shifts the attention to the diversity of defects and features of ambiguous regimes (e.g. “double-root” strategy by Boggards 2009; “two-dimensional” regime-typology by Wigell 2008; “configurative” approach by Gilbert / Mohseni 2011).

By and large, these present approaches to define a regime type “sui generis” (Rüb 2002: 94) tend to go along with a strong criticism of former conceptualizations: (I) concerning their rather naïve or normative expectancies; (II) their uni-dimensionality; and (III) their dominant transitional perspective.

First of all, previous attempts to classify the concerned regimes as diminished subtypes of already existing concepts are criticized for their either euphemistic or overtly negative perspective. Furthermore, they are considered as misleading as for instance some of the described defective democracies hardly seem to fit the basic criteria of liberal democracy. Second, all uni-dimensional approaches are presently criticized for not being able to capture today’s political reality in which “political regimes are not necessarily distributed in a linear fashion along a single continuum” (Wigell 2008: 231) with an autocratic and a democratic pole. This criticism concerns the traditional dichotomous distinction between democratic and nondemocratic regimes as well as the recent graded approaches acknowledging in-between categories such as semi-authoritarianism or semi-democracy (Wigell 2008: 233). Third, nearly all of the present contributions dismiss the transitional perspective dominant in prior works. Three decades after the first uprisings, the authors conclude that many regimes have arranged themselves in a quite permanent hybrid status quo. They are marked by sustainability and durability and show no indication of consolidation or regression into one or the other direction in the short run (Bogaards 2009: 415, Ekman 2009: 8).

Against this background, recent conceptualizations (see publications listed above) promote a classification of hybrid regimes as a distinctive, new and proliferating regime type – probably the most dispersive of the
2. Theoretical considerations

21st century. They base this classification on the notion that the third wave is »less a triumph of political liberalism and liberal democracy than a success story for hybrid or ambiguous regimes« (Croissant / Merkel 2004: 2). In any case, hybrid regimes are considered likely to challenge national developments as well as the international community in the foreseeable future. This fact makes these regimes, their origination, stability, and future prospects an interesting object to study for political scientists.

2.1.2 Defining hybrid regimes

The preceding chapter outlined the development of a research discourse on hybrid regimes as the result of a growing pessimism among researchers on democratization concerning the outcome of the third wave transformations.

This chapter further specifies the nature of these hybrid regimes. To approximate the definition of a regime type sui generis, it sketches their most common denominators; their context of origin in the third wave of democratization, their ambiguous political nature and their surprising stability and persistence over time.

2.1.2.1 Their context of origin: The third wave

As stated in the previous chapter, the debate on hybrid regimes originated in the reflection of scholars on the outcome and prospects of the former third wave states. In the meantime, the term in a broader understanding has also been applied to other contexts and cases, as presently the majority of non-democratic states show at least some democratic features and ambiguities. However, when trying to capture a regime type sui generis, a focus on the former third wave states is reasonable – based on the term’s evolutionary history and to avoid a further stretching of the concept.

Huntington defined a wave of democratization as »a group of transitions from non-democratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time« (Huntington 1993: 15). The third wave numerically outnumbered its predecessors with 78 countries which underwent transformations from an authoritarian past towards at least formal democratic systems between 1974 and 1995. These transitions took place in Latin America, South and Eastern Europe as well as in South East Asia,
and were marked by a particular world context. Most of the affected countries had profited from the global economic growth of the 1950s and 1960s that facilitated democratization and heightened expectancies on democracy. Besides, the third wave scaled in a context in which democratic values were widely accepted and authoritarian leaders faced increasing legitimation problems. Against this background, most of the transitions were marked by strong support if not pressure by external forces, including the world’s major powers. Furthermore, the third wave accelerated through snowballing effects when upheavals in the earlier transitions fuelled protest and democratic change in neighboring countries and even spread to other world regions. (Huntington 1991)

By and large, this conducive context inspired the initial optimism about a rapid consolidation and the worldwide triumph of democracy as described in the previous chapter. Moreover, it contributed to the quick building up and institutionalization of democratic structures. Nevertheless, it also provided the background for many of the arising problems – the weakness of democratic institutions, the lacking anchorage of democratic values, and the persistence of autocratic legacies.

2.1.2.2 Their features: An ambiguous political nature

The central characteristic feature of hybrid regimes in the present understanding is their ambiguous political nature. The term *hybrid* in its origin refers to »something that consists of or comes from a mixture of two or more things« (Fox et al 2003: 799). In the context of democratization studies, authors have further defined the hybrid nature of regimes as the coexistence of democratic and undemocratic (while not necessarily authoritarian) partial regimes within one political regime (Zinecker 2009: 302ff). In the case of the third wave, this usually means the existence of formal democratic structures such as institutions, parties, and elections on the one side. On the other, a persistence of autocratic features and legacies in political and societal practice.

In the following, the most common ambiguities of hybrid regimes as described in the literature are systematically grouped according to three

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6 Huntington dates the first wave of democratization to 1828-1922 and the second to 1943-1962 (Merkel 2010: 128).
2. Theoretical considerations

crucial fields, including elections (legitimation of power), the rule of law (execution of power), and the division of powers (scope of power) (see table 1).

First, elections in hybrid regimes have to be in a minimal democratic sense free and fair. In differentiation from many authoritarian regimes that presently tend to hold fake elections, they may »serve as a source of legitimacy and, consequently, may even be bitterly contested« (Ekman 2009: 9). Nevertheless, potential democratic deficits in hybrid regimes may include disenfranchisement, suffrage restrictions, vote-buying, and voter intimidation up to »deliberately biased electoral rules« (Wigell 2008: 242). Against this background, elections in hybrid regimes do matter but in the face of possible deficits and restrictions they risk becoming rather meaningless concerning their de facto impact on the regime (Rüb 2002: 107).

Table 1: Defining hybrid regimes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authoritarian</th>
<th>Hybrid</th>
<th>Democratic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elections (legitimation of power)</td>
<td>Fake or no elections at all</td>
<td>Elections (to a minimum degree) free and fair but rather meaningless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule of law (execution of power)</td>
<td>Arbitrary or no rule of law at all</td>
<td>Power is exercised through law, but impaired by decrees, corruption, politicization, reserved domains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance of power (scope of power)</td>
<td>Strong and uncontrolled Executive</td>
<td>De facto strong executive but weak institutions and opposition and restricted liberties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s illustration, based on Rüb 2002 and Wigell 2008

Second, in contrast to authoritarian regimes, power in hybrid regimes is exercised through law generated by legal proceedings and institutions. Nonetheless, democratic rule may be limited and biased through the extensive use of decrees and a de facto superior position of the executive (Rüb 2002: 107f). The rule of law may be impaired through the
politicization of the police, the administration or the judiciary, and unsanctioned encroachment (Rüb 2002: 108f, Wigell 2008: 241ff). Besides, many hybrid regimes may have to deal with so-called reserved domains referring to specific policy areas in which decision-making power still belongs to unelected actors (such as the military) instead of democratically elected representatives (Wigell 2008: 238f). Similar things happen if tutelary powers such as foreign governments, international institutions or influential economic actors possess undue power – as for instance it may be the case in post-colonial settings (Wigell 2008: 239). Furthermore, regime-hybridity may be defined through »brown areas« – territorial units controlled by undue local powers such as the drug mafia or guerilla forces (Wigell 2008: 241). Moreover, third, in hybrid regimes the division of powers tends to be unbalanced. In practice, existing control institutions may be weak or highly politicized or biased through clientelism, corruption or unsanctioned encroachment (Wigell 2008: 241f). This weakness of democratic institutions often leads to a de facto strong and little-controlled executive. In many hybrid regimes oppositional forces also tend to be weak. Political liberties such as the freedom of press, assembly and association or speech formally exist. However, many regimes fail to protect human rights and may show certain disrespect for civil liberties (Ekmann 2009: 7), concerning dissenting individuals as well as organized actors. In practice, there might be an »uneven media coverage« (Ekman 2009: 9), ethnic or other social groups may be restrained from or handicapped while participating in the political process, and civic protest banned or controlled (Ekman 2009).

2.1.2.3 Their prospects: Persistence

The third indicator that informs the classification of hybrid regimes as a genuine regime type is their stability and durability over time. After all, most of the ambiguous features mentioned above apply to transitional contexts as well. They constitute typical initial difficulties of young democracies in the transition process from an autocratic past towards democratic consolidation. However, political regimes are »more permanent form(s) of political organization« (Fishmann 1990: 428 cited by Morlino 2009: 277). As a consequence, to be labeled as a single regime type, hybrid regimes have to show »at least minimal stabilization« (Morlino 2009: 277).
Against this background, the concept of hybrid regimes explicitly does not refer to transitional periods, but concentrates on those which fail to consolidate in a long-term perspective and moreover, despite their ambiguous nature, show an astonishing stability and persistence (Croissant / Merkel 2004: 3, Ekman 2009: 8). As a consequence, the defects and autocratic legacies of hybrid regimes have to be structural and persist over time. They do not capture mere autocratic tendencies of a single head of state, government, or election period, but have to be immanent to the regime as such. In this context, scholars have already pointed out that regime-hybridity actually transcends state structures and tends to be deeply rooted in society as well (Zinecker 2009, Ekman 2009) – suggesting the choice of qualitative and in-depth, analytical approaches for the study of hybrid regimes.

2.1.3 Empirical evidence and proliferation

Current publications dealing with the conceptualization and exploration of hybrid regimes tend to emphasize the relevance of their research interest by recurring to statistical evidence on their worldwide proliferation (Diamond 2002, Morlino 2009). They use to refer to one or more of the existing democratic indices dealing with »empirical comparative analysis« (Pickel / Pickel 2006: 161) of political regimes. The principal aim of these indices is the quantitative measurement and assessment of democracy, illustrated through the development of classifications and regime typologies (Pickel / Pickel 2006: 161). As briefly summarized by Lauth, this research branch dates back to the late 1950s. Since then it has been marked by Dahl’s considerations on »polyarchy« (Dahl 1956, 1971), experienced new input and methodological enhancements in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Coppedge / Reinicke 1990, Gastil 1990, Vanhanen 1984) and also experienced further consolidation and diversification since the 1990s. (Lauth et al 2000: 11)

Indeed, in the last 20 years we can observe increasing attempts to measure not only democracy but all kinds of political regimes worldwide (for an overview see: Pickel / Pickel 2006, Munck / Verkuilen 2002, Lauth et al 2000). This is reflected as well by a growing influence and consideration of democratic indices within democratization studies (Lauth 2000: 11). In fact, the emerging discourse on hybrid regimes and the large-scale comparative assessment of regimes seem to have mutually enriched each other.
The following section takes a look at some of the most popular indices that capture and label the gray zone between authoritarianism and consolidated democracy. It demonstrates how these reflect and entitle hybrid regimes and what they tell us about their numerical development and proliferation in the world since 1974.

»One of the most utilized democracy indicators in contemporary academic research« (Knutsen 2010: 112) – although quite controversial – is published by the US Organization Freedom House annually since 1972. Countries are rated on a scale from 1 to 7 according to two dimensions, political rights and civil liberties. Based on both ratings, a status indicating the country’s general state of liberty is assigned, differentiating between free, partly free and not free. The Freedom House classifications provide a first example of how regime-hybridity is displayed and reflected in democratic indices. Partly free countries are characterized »by some restrictions on political rights and civil liberties, often in a context of corruption, weak rule of law, ethnic strife, or civil war«. In the Freedom House report of the year 2016 (year under review: 2015), 59 out of 195 countries were rated as partly free (30%). In addition to that, Freedom House identifies so-called electoral democracies that »have met certain minimum standards« of democracy but do not catch up to liberal democracies«. (Freedom House: Freedom Map 2013). For 2015, 125 countries were rated as electoral democracies (64%). However, only 86 of them can be classified as free which means that the remaining 39 belong to the group of partly free countries, lacking substantial rights and liberties. (Freedom House: Freedom in the World 2016)

Another index illustrating the blurring boundaries between autocracy and democracy has been generated since the mid-1970s in the framework of the Polity project. The policy indicators developed by Jaggers and Gurr lay a particular focus on the evolution and dynamics of political regimes since the 19th century (Pickel / Pickel 2006: 184). Their three-part regime

7 The indices (Freedom House, Polity IV Project and Democracy Index) were selected as they explicitly categorize mixed regimes and cover a certain period of time.
8 Of course, this is done with some discomfort due to their controversial reputation and bearing in mind that the aim of this thesis is expressly to enhance research through a qualitative approach to regime-hybridity. Nonetheless, it is useful to support the overall research interest empirically and to get an insight into the relevance of the phenomenon.
categorization again reflects the existence of some type of mixed or hybrid regimes. In order to cover the gray zone between autocracy and democracy, the researchers use the term *anocracies* characterized as »mixed, or incoherent, authority regimes« (The Polity Project 2012). In its latest data of 2012 Polity IV classifies 58% of all rated countries as democracies, 13% as autocracies and 29% as anocracies.

Table 2: Display of regime-hybridity in different democratic indices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democratic end</th>
<th>Grey zone (hybrid) regimes</th>
<th>Authoritarian end</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Freedom House</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral democracies</td>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Partly free</td>
<td>Not free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Democracy index</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full democracies</td>
<td></td>
<td>Flawed democracies</td>
<td>Hybrid regimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Polity IV</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Anocracies</td>
<td>Autocracies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s illustration

A more recent approach to the measurement of democracy constitutes the Democracy Index generated by the Economist Intelligence Unit since 2007. The authors use the terms *flawed* democracy and *hybrid* regimes. Flawed democracies are characterized as countries which on the one side hold free and fair elections and respect basic civil liberties. On the other, they show »significant weaknesses in other aspects of democracy including problems in governance, an underdeveloped political culture and low levels of political participation« (Democracy Index 2010: 31f). In comparison, hybrid regimes show even more deficits and similarities to authoritarian ones with »substantial irregularities« in elections and »serious weaknesses« in the other areas. In practice, this means a high degree of corruption, a weak rule of law, weak civil society, and the restriction of public space (Democracy Index 2010: 31f). The Democracy Index in its latest data of 2014 rates only 24 countries (14%) out of 167 as full democracies but 52 (31%) as authoritarian regimes. The gray zone covering 91 ambiguous or hybrid regimes makes up 53%. It is divided into 52 flawed democracies and 39 hybrid regimes.

By and large, the examples show how different types of hybrid regimes are reflected in current democratic indices. However, as the three indices apply different standards, approaches and terms, the number of regimes that fall into this gray zone varies significantly.
Finally, a look at the historical data as provided by Freedom House provides insight into the evolutionary proliferation of ambiguous regimes.\(^9\) Particularly between 1974-1995 the percentage of states categorized as not free has been declining and that of free states has risen, reflecting third wave transitions and the subsequent stagnation since then. Recently, electoral democracies are on the rise while the number of partly free states remains quite stable or declined. (Freedom House: Freedom in the World 2016)

By and large, the look at the findings of different democratic indices emphasizes the relevance and actuality of regime-hybridity in the world and reveals some trends. First of all, although the considered democratic indices show essential differences regarding used methods, categories and terms, all of them go beyond the traditional dichotomy between democratic and nondemocratic regimes. More precisely, they include one or even more in-between categories – i.e. flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, anocracies, partly free states – that illustrate the existence of some type of hybrid regimes. Second, with variations depending on classifications and number of applied categories, in 2015, countries placed in these in-between categories make up a considerable share of 29-53%. Third, a diachronic analysis of data generated since 1974 illustrates a general trend. The declining number of regimes at the authoritarian end goes along with an at least stable if not increasing number of in-between regimes that do not fit the criteria of liberal democracy.

However, bearing in mind the aim to further explore hybrid regimes, the limits of quantitative democratic indices – often criticized for their superficiality, imprecision, politicization or Western bias – become even more evident. Democratic indices constitute graded approaches, taking the traditional categories of democracy and authoritarianism as a starting point to classify regimes according to their proximity to one or both ends. Although these indices help us to prove the existence of an in-between zone, they remain little meaningful concerning the vertical diversity and particular shades of hybrid regimes. Moreover, these indices risk pretending a questionable clarity and hierarchy while there is not even a consensus on the definition of liberal democracy.

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\(^9\) The description is based on Freedom House as it provides data since the beginning of the third wave democratization processes in 1974.
2. Theoretical considerations

In a nutshell, the consideration of democratic indices can only serve as a starting point for the exploration of hybrid regimes. These statistical data highlight the relevance and actuality of the phenomenon under study and at once point out the need for a more in-depth approach to regime-hybridity.

2.1.4 Current questions and research gaps (bringing in civil society)

The previous chapters have traced the research discourse on hybrid regimes, their characteristics, and proliferation. Today, the research field is stimulated by the observation that while democracy as a worldwide regime-legitimation strategy« is on the upswing, »the number of regimes that are no longer explicit or closed authoritarian regimes, but neither are full-blown liberal democracies, has increased dramatically« (Robertson 2007: 781). Current research deals with how to classify, denominate and in which framework to analyze these hybrid regimes. At the beginning of the 21st century, democratization studies are no longer reduced to transitology and consolidology as predicted in the 1980s and 1990s (Bogaards 2009: 415) but have discovered hybrids as a particular subject of investigation.

As seen above, the emphasis in most of the publications on regime-hybridity lies on the design of conceptual regime typologies supported by quantitative analyses. Hybrid regimes are discussed in comparison to other regime types and regarding their proliferation in the world. A frequent procedure is the use of democratic indices to develop a proper regime typology (Boogards 2009: 407) and coin new terms or categories. Hybrid regimes have become a common benchmark and frequently used category in comparative and large-scale statistical analyses of democracy’s proliferation and future. Still, it seems as if research up to now has only provided insufficient explanations for their stability and persistence. Little attention has been paid to the practical arrangement and individual features of regime-hybridity; typologies tend to classify hybrid regimes one-sidedly according to their closeness to authoritarianism or democracy while largely ignoring their diversity (Bogaards 2009: 400; Gilbert / Mohseni 2011: 282). Moreover, they tend to concentrate on institutional and state structures while turning a blind eye on the embeddedness of hybrid regime structures in society. Up to now, few qualitative analyses use the concept of regime-hybridity in their research on one of the mixed regimes that have originated since 1974. What is regime-hybridity really
2.1 Hybrid regimes (democratization studies)

about, what are its practical implications, and how can we define its practical design in particular countries?

This thesis responds to these considerations by bringing in civil society organizations (CSOs) as so far understudied but potential actors in hybrid regimes. The next chapter provides insight into their conceptualization, characteristic features, and potential to act as agents of change. Altogether, it will become evident that CSOs are an interesting (f)actor to study in hybrid regimes – concerning their stability as well as well as their prospects for future democratization.
2. Theoretical considerations

2.2 Civil society organizations (CSOs)

The previous chapters have outlined the discussion within democratization studies and comparative politics about hybrid regimes, their stability and persistence. Against this background, this thesis focuses on civil society organizations (CSOs) as potential actors and asks for the specific challenges they face, the roles they assume and their respective potential to bring about change in the hybrid regime context of Nicaragua.

This chapter summarizes the related state of the art. It starts with outlining the theoretical fundamentals of research on CSOs, sketching the civil society concept’s genesis, common actors and current research trends (2.2.1). The subsequent sub-chapter introduces two common approaches to the study of CSOs (civil society resp. third sector research), highlighting the strong link between CSOs and the concept of democracy (2.2.2). Chapter 2.2.3 finally outlines the paradox of civil society in nondemocratic regimes. It points out the existing research gaps to then present three approaches to the question of civic organization in autocratic settings drawing on related research fields. The preliminary conclusion in 2.2.4 brings down the current state of the art on CSOs and (non-) democracy to the importance of context.

2.2.1 Fundamentals

»About 15 years ago the concept of civil society experienced a revival and has since then, enjoyed great popularity. Many politically or socially committed people see the strengthening of civil society as a panacea against the disruptions in the social world, whereas some scholars have become increasingly skeptical if the term is still able to denominate anything at all.«\(^{10}\) (Adloff 2005: 7)

The term civil society and its conceptualization have occupied philosophers from Aristotle up to the present (for an overview of the conceptual history see Cohen / Arato 1994). Nevertheless, our current notion of civil society is strongly marked by the concept’s revival since the 1970s. Civil society gained momentum in the protests of the revolutionary masses pressing ahead the overthrow of authoritarian leaders in Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe (Badie et al 2011: 261). Initially

\(^{10}\) Translation by the author
rediscovered in the context of these third wave democratization processes, civil society today has gained significance far beyond its role in antidictatorial protests. Even more, it has turned into a synonym for transformations and hopes in modern Western democratic societies as well (Anheier et al 2000, Foley / Edwards 1996, Kocka 2004). The concept of civil society expresses self-organization and individual responsibility in times of a growing skepticism towards pervasive welfare states. It presents an »alternative to the unbridled capitalism« (Kocka 2004: 67) in the face of an ever more rapidly processing globalization. Last but not least, it promises social cohesion in our increasingly individualist and fragmented societies (Kocka 2004: 67f).

Unsurprisingly, this diversity of hopes associated with the idea of civil society has not made it easier to define. Civil society remains an imprecise and ambiguous concept, charged with normative expectations and highly contested regarding its differentiation from other spheres or the actors it comprises. Responding to this complexity, Kocka (Kocka 2004: 68f) defines civil society with a view to three different dimensions. First, as a project with utopian traits always directed towards the improvement of social conditions. Second, as a certain type of social action which is charitable, peaceful, civic, public, pluralist, and self-organized. Third, as a social sphere between the market, the state, and the private – referring to »the public space occupied by clubs, associations, social movements, networks and initiatives« (Kocka 2004: 69).

At the same time, empirical research on civil society tends to focus on particular actors. Civil society can be classified according to its degree of organization, size or members. It includes individuals standing up against social evils up to large and traditional, hierarchically organized charity organizations. The concept comprises membership organizations such as trade unions as well as small but highly professionalized NGOs. In terms of geographic extension, the term covers local coffee cooperatives next to transnationally working foundations. Regarding their objectives, we can spot civil society actors who fight for individual interests such as an action group trying to protect a building listed for demolition. Others raise humanity’s general concerns in the fight against climate change or poverty. Organizations embedded into existing welfare structures act as service providers and advocates of their particular target groups, while again others such as many sports clubs hardly seem to have any political agenda at all. From a diachronic perspective, we can classify civil society actors according to different traditions – from a classic philanthropic setting over the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s to the boom of transna-
2. Theoretical considerations

 tionally working, professional actors since the 1990s (for an overview see Charnovitz 1997, Martens 2002). Last but not least, in the 21st century, the rise of new media has mixed up traditional forms of organization and action through the benefits of digital communication (Naughton 2001, Castells 2005).

Today, particularly civil society organizations (CSOs)11 are at the center of research due to the expansion of empirical studies driven by the ambition to define and measure civil society and its impact on society. A starting point was the development of institutional, pragmatic approaches to civil society promoted through interdisciplinary *third sector studies* since the 1970s, starting with Etzioni (1973) and Levitt (1973) (Lorentzen 2011: 25). The term CSO is often used interchangeably with similar labels such as *voluntary* associations or the *nonprofit* sector (Lorentzen 2011). Approaches may ground in organizational sociology and focus on CSOs’ internal structures, members, goals or strategies (Frantz / Zimmer 2001, Olk et al 1995). Another branch of research explores and measures the levels of civic participation and volunteering and people’s motivation to get civically engaged in voluntary organizations (for an overview see Hustinx et al 2011). In the last years, several EU-funded research projects explore(d) CSOs in the context of social innovation (WILCO12), with a focus on social enterprises (EFESIIIS13) or their tangible impact on society (TSI14). Furthermore, research on CSOs has long reached international scope. Initiatives like the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project15, CIVICUS Civil Society Index16, or the World Value Survey17 capture and compare the existence of CSOs and civic engagement worldwide (Heinrich 2010: 377).

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11 Term denotes the more organized form of civil society (in contrast to individual actors or ad-hoc coalitions) embracing diverse legal forms of organization. For further information on the term’s use in this thesis see chapter 2.3 (synthesis).
12 http://www.wilcoproject.eu/
13 http://www.fp7-efeseis.eu/
14 http://thirdsectorimpact.eu/
15 http://ccss.jhu.edu/research-projects/comparative-nonprofit-sector-project
17 http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp
2.2.2 An inextricable link? CSOs and democracy

»That the state overstrains, the market gets too strong and society fragments – these three concerns define the mental situation in which the promise of civil society today unfolds its charm.« \cite{Gosewinkel et al 2004: 12f}

Since its revival in the 1970s, the study of CSOs has been intrinsically linked to the study of democracy. In this context, the discourse has been largely dominated by a normative, western-liberal understanding – a reciprocity that stands to reason. On the one side, a stable and vital democracy for its realization relies on the virtues of civic organization \cite{Warren 2011: 380}. On the other, a vibrant and dynamic CSO sector flourishes best in a democratic framework and under the rule of law \cite{Kocka 2004: 71}. Against this background, common research often seems to be restricted to democratic or at least democratizing societies as a democratic context is seen as a prerequisite for the evolution of civic engagement and the development of an autonomous, vibrant and self-organized CSO sector \cite{Wnuk-Lipinsky 2009: 675}. Authors emphasize the importance of access to the political system and influence, the validity of democratic institutions and the rule of law \cite{Kocka 2004: 71f, Pollack 2003: 57}, as well as the protection of an institutionalized legal order for the functioning of CSOs \cite{Diamond 1994: 5}. Altogether, the mutual dependence of CSOs and democracy becomes evident when thinking of central democratic achievements such as the liberties of speech, association and press, the rule of law, a favorable socio-economic context, and a political culture of participation. Nonetheless, this reciprocity also leads us to what is discussed as the »paradox of civil society« \cite{Edwards / Foley 1996, Walzer 1992}; the perception that a democratic state needs CSOs for its consolidation and stability – but at the same time CSOs seem to be dependent on a strong and democratic society in order to freely unfold their potentials.

Current discussions about the functions, benefits and importance of CSOs for the flourishing of democratic societies can be located at the intersection of two different approaches; the first predominant in the field of political science centering on the normative idea of civil society and the second evolving in the disciplines of sociology and economics focusing on the concept of the third sector.

\cite{Translation by the author}
In political science research on CSOs tends to be marked by a normative notion of civil society and largely draws on the history of political thought (Tocqueville 1985, Cohen / Arato 1992, Klein 2001). Central for the understanding of CSOs in this context are the seminal works of Alexis de Tocqueville and his 19\textsuperscript{th}-century studies of »Democracy in America« (De Tocqueville 1821). De Tocqueville linked the quality and depth of democracy in the United States to the broad spectrum of associations and the high degree of citizen participation in the country. In his tradition, neo-Tocquevillian approaches advocate the indispensability of a vibrant and distinctive CSO sector for the civility, depth and longevity of a democratic society (see Almond / Verba 1963, Cohen / Arato 1994, Putnam 1993).

Up until today, many authors have tried to recapitulate the concrete democratic aspirations associated with CSOs (Anheier et al 2000, Diamond 1994, Merkel 2000, Pollack 2003, Warren 2011). These can be summarized as follows: First, in a genuine Tocquevillian tradition CSOs are seen as schools of democracy that provide their members with basic democratic skills. The idea behind it is that even rather non-political CSOs such as sports clubs or parents’ associations serve as fora for debate while teaching tolerance and respect, and how to compromise, negotiate and deliberate. In this educational function, they can promote and cultivate the »habits of the hearts that encourage tolerance, cooperation, and civic engagement« (Foley / Edwards 1996: 39). Within the CSO sector leaders are elected and disputes are civically settled – fostering integration, socialization, and mitigation of societal cleavages (Diamond 1994: 9, Warren 2011: 381). Additionally, CSOs strengthen and enhance social capital and social trust and serve as a source for recruiting and training of political leaders (Giersdorf / Croissant 2011: 5, Diamond 1994: 8f). Second, CSOs constitute a forum for the »articulation, aggregation, and representation of interests« (Diamond 1994: 8). They can aggregate aspirations, objectives, needs, and values, they provide information, act as agenda setters and promote and channel citizen’s participation and mobilization »around values and interests« (Wnuk-Lipinsky 2009: 681). A third set of democratic functions is closely related to the control and limitation of state power and the protection of the individual. This includes the protection from »arbitrary interference« (Wnuk-Lipinsky 2009: 681) of the state to the warranty of checks and balances in the political sphere (Diamond 1994: 7, Wnuk-Lipinsky 2009: 681).

The second approach to the study of CSOs grounds in the fields of economics and sociology and explores CSOs as an integral part of the »third sector« (Etzioni 1973, Salamon 1999, Salamon and Anheier 1997,
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Weisbrod 1991). Tying in with Kocka’s definition outlined above, the focus here is on the specific societal sphere comprised of organized actors that can neither be assigned to the sector of the market nor to the state and that differ from the concept of family through their formal organizational character (Anheier et al 2000: 75).

The term third sector was coined by Etzioni in his article on »The Third Sector and Domestic Missions« (Etzioni 1973). Based on his »skepticism toward the expanding state as well as market-based welfare« (Lorentzen 2011), he promoted the exploration of CSOs as domestic service providers combining »the best of two worlds« (Etzioni 1971: 315, cited from Lorentzen 2011: 26). The field traditionally perceives CSOs as an economic factor. They are discussed as »institutional alternative to state welfare production« (Anheier et al 2000: 71), focusing on their role as service deliverers or the economic benefits arising from volunteering or civic engagement for society as a whole. Compared to the rather normative idea of civil society, third sector research is more empirically based and marked by micro-level approaches highlighting the issues of self-organization and local civic engagement. At the same time, it served to open up and explore civic organization all over the world (Anheier / Salamon 1998, Salamon et al 1999, 2004.).

While civil society research tends to focus on the issue of participation and CSOs’ contribution to the »input legitimacy of the political system« (Zimmer 2011: 202) the third sector tradition explores them as an alternative resource of government and envisages their effect on the output dimension of the political system (Anheier et al 2000: 77). On the whole, this perspective adds a new dimension to the functions attributed to CSOs highlighting their role and significance in service provision. As social service providers CSOs facilitate local provision, disburden the state and are involved in policy implementation (Pollack 2003: 53). Although diverging from the normative democratic-participatory functions that mark the overall picture of CSOs, third sector approaches are gaining increasing importance in times of worldwide economic crises and overburdened European welfare states. Although both research fields, civil society and third sector research, differ in their particular disciplinary background, focuses and approaches, we can find many substantive overlaps and increasingly blurring boundaries between both perspectives (Zimmer 2011: 205). After all, Anheier et al highlighted already in 2000 that »in the connection be-
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tween civil society and third sector there is an important nexus for the comprehension of modern societies and democratic development (An-heier et al 2000: 73).

2.2.3 A paradox? CSOs in nondemocratic settings

Given the currently dominant normative and western-oriented perspective on civil society, research on CSOs in nondemocratic settings remains less frequent and theoretically underdeveloped. Scholars tend to take a blind eye on the issue, on the one side because nondemocratic regimes have a record of repressing independent civic organization. On the other side, because civic organization in nondemocratic regimes will probably not fit the predominant normative and western-biased understanding of civil society. Searching common databanks for research on civil society and all kinds of nondemocratic regimes, only a small number of publications can be found that explicitly match both terms. These tend to be more recent and focus on diverse nondemocratic or transitional regimes, including for example Kaldor / Kostovicova 2008 (Global Civil Society and Illiberal Regimes), Cavatorta 2011 (Civil Society Activism under authoritarian rule), Bernhard / Karakoc 2007 (Civil Society and the Legacies of Dictatorship), Tusalem 2008 (A Boon or a Bane? The Role of Civil Society in Third- and Fourth-Wave Democracies) or Zinecker 2011 (Civil Society in Developing Countries – Conceptual Considerations). Although quite diverse, their common denominator is their emphasis on the diverse forms and attitudes CSOs might adopt in nondemocratic settings. Against this background, they tend to pledge for a pragmatic and open concept of civil society to make it applicable to contexts other than liberal democracy.

In sum, there is a general scarcity of publications of empirically and theoretically elaborated research CSOs in nondemocratic regimes. However, there is a range of publications that somehow strive or broach the issue indirectly and from different angles. The following chapters briefly sketch how the topic of CSOs and non-democracy is explored in different research fields. These include the study of CSOs as agents of democratization within transition processes in the field of civil society

19 Translation by the author
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research (2.2.3.1); the worldwide empirical exploration of CSOs and their heterogeneity in global third sector studies (2.2.3.2); and research on civic organization as part of the authoritarian order in research on authoritarian regimes (2.2.3.3).

2.2.3.1 The civil society approach: CSOs as agents of democratization

”It is now clear, that to comprehend democratic change around the world, one must study civil society.” (Diamond 1994: 5)

The most popular approach to civic organization in nondemocratic settings explores CSOs as agents of democratization, that is in terms of their ability to challenge authoritarian governments and to promote democratization. This branch of literature has its origin in the academic debate about the role of civil society in the transitions of the third wave of democratization (FSB 1997, Havel 1988, O’Donnell / Schmitter / Whitehead 1986). Since then it largely influences academic and public discourse about CSOs in nondemocratic settings and finds its practical repercussion in the framework of international democracy promotion. Scholars theoretically draw on De Tocqueville and the »civil society argument« (Chambers / Kopstein 2001: 837) referring to the idea that »a robust, strong and vibrant civil society strengthens and enhances liberal democracy« (Chambers / Kopstein 2001: 837).

In the course of the third wave, scholars discovered the power and virtues of CSOs within the transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The by majority peaceful transitions in Latin America and Eastern Europe demonstrated how organized civic actors were able to pressure change from below and challenge even established long-term dictators (see O'Donnell et al 1986, Diamond 1994, Havel 1988, Linz / Stepan 1996, Wnuk-Lipinski 2009). Against this background, scholars started to investigate how CSOs in nondemocratic settings promote democratic values, try to protect citizens from arbitrary governments and serve as a sphere of formation of opinion and interest representation (FSB 1997, Merkel 2000). Furthermore, they analyzed the importance and roles of CSOs in the different stages of democratization (O’Donnel et al 1986). In the reflection of these democratization processes, scholars acknowledged that civil society either predates or at least tends to accompany a successful transition to democracy (Ishkanian 2008: 59). More precisely, CSOs are attributed a major role in both the initial transition and the consolidation of democratic structures (Giersdorf / Croissant 2011: 1f). With that, authors argue that
they are able to mobilize interests and protests to »pressure authoritarians for change« (Edwards / Foley 1996: 46). The third argument is closely related and concerns the role of CSOs’ as antagonists to an authoritarian state. It refers to the ability of CSOs to control and limit state power and to protect the individual against »arbitrary interference« (Wnuk-Lipinski 2009: 681) of the state. CSOs in nondemocratic settings may be able to serve as watchdogs, depict shortcomings and denounce malpractices. Also, they often serve as defenders of citizens’ rights and liberties (Kaldor / Kostovicova 2008: 92ff).

Later, this normative view on CSOs found its empirical application within the policies of external democracy promotion. Against the background of a general hype about the virtues of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the 1990s, donors and policymakers worldwide came to believe that »civil society is critical to development, democratization and successful transition« (Ishkanian 2008: 58). As a consequence, democracy promotion enlarged its traditional funding and support for institutions by the promotion of NGOs as new »fighters of freedom« (Ishkanian 2008: 58). Since then, the analysis of the crucial role and contribution of CSOs in the process of external democracy promotion has become an integral part of this normative approach to CSOs in nondemocratic regimes. More recently, the discourse regained momentum with the uprisings of the Arab Spring and the debate about the role of social networks and civic organization for the outbreak and intensity of protests (Howard / Hussain 2011, Lim 2012, Wolfsfeld et al 2013). 

Taken together, the civil society approach highlights the importance of CSOs in transition processes. Focusing on their positive effect on political systems it emphasizes their role as an »essential ingredient in both democratization and the health of established democracies« (Foley / Edwards 1996: 38). However, literature in this neo-Tocquevillian tradition is criticized for its normative and Western bias and the blind eye it takes on the potential insecurities and arbitrariness of civic organization under nondemocratic rule (Armony 2004, Brysk 2000, Carothers / Barndt 1999, Chambers / Kopstein 2001). Particularly in the last years, alternative approaches to CSOs in nondemocratic settings let us question this solely positive image as euphemistic or biased as we will see in the next section.
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2.2.3.2 Global third sector research: The heterogeneity of civic organization

»Extrapolating from the courageous role of civic groups that fought communism in Eastern Europe, some civil society enthusiasts have propagated the misleading notion that civil society consists only of noble causes and earnest, well-intentioned actors. Yet civil society everywhere is a bewildering array of the good, the bad, and the outright bizarre.« (Carothers / Barndt 1999: 20)

Unsurprisingly, the overall normative charging and Western-centrism of the debate on civil society has provoked criticism and alternative perspectives. As outlined earlier, the expansion of third sector studies since the 1970s but particularly recently has contributed a lot to opening up the study of civil society organizations beyond Western liberal democracies. The field of third sector research has promoted the empirical exploration of CSOs in nondemocratic regimes by its focus on a down-to-earth analysis of CSOs and CSO sectors worldwide (Anheier / Salamon 1998, Heinrich 2007, Heinrich / Fioramonti 2008, Salamon et al. 1999, 2004, Taylor 2011).

Prominent examples that have laid the ground for this second approach to civic organization in nondemocratic regimes are the studies undertaken by the CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation20 or the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (CNP)21. These large-scale studies explore and compare CSOs and third sectors, their composition, size, character and difficulties on a global scale. A common characteristic of this second branch of literature is its bottom-up, down to earth, more neutral and functional approach to CSOs focusing on their organizational features and impact on society. Scholars in this tradition tend to concentrate on CSOs in diverse political settings via quantitative as well as qualitative, in-depth case studies of particular organizations. They explore the internal structures of civic organizations, their legitimation and funding sources, objectives, analyze their accountability or representation within the population. A distinctive feature is the study of the socio-economic contribution and impact of third sectors with reference to their role in service provision and embeddedness in national welfare state structures. The core assertion is that CSOs exist in all kinds of political regimes although these might diverge from the »liberal Western conception of civil

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21 http://cess.jhu.edu/research-projects/comparative-nonprofit-sector-project/
society as a space between the family, the market and state« (Kaldor / Kostovicova 2008: 91). More precisely, in opposition to the normative civil society approach outlined above, scholars highlight the heterogeneity of civil society. They criticize that the connection between CSOs and democracy is not as stringent as it may appear at first sight (Roth 2003: 61) and that the democratic functions and effects associated with CSOs are »contingent rather than necessary« (Warren 2011: 378).

The empirical and open exploration of CSOs on a global scale has also fuelled the debate about the so-called »dark side« (Roth 2003) of civil society. Studies in this perspective point to the deficits and setbacks of CSOs criticizing their internal structure, questionable objectives or general lack of representation and legitimation (Anheier / Hawkes 2008, Bob 2011, Chambers / Kopstein 2001, Meyer 2009: 142f, Murphy 2011). The comparative study of CSO sectors worldwide reveals that CSOs do not necessarily (or exclusively) pursue democratic, altruistic and humanitarian values and objectives. In fact, scholars argue that they may also »advocate hate and bigotry« (Chambers / Kopstein 2001: 840) and promote unprogressive, nationalist or terrorist objectives. They may be exclusionary or violent (Bob 2011: 212) or pursue hidden economic interests (Meyer 2009: 143). Examples quoted for illiberal or antidemocratic attitudes within CSOs are manifold. They include right-wing nationalist groups, violent football fans or religiously-fanatic associations and sects. Interestingly, these dark civil society actors may even seem to perform many of the positive functions and promote values traditionally associated with CSOs. They may encourage discipline, self-worth, protection, or trust and cooperation among their members. Still, they are spreading hate and discrimination against others – undermining democratic values and a pluralist and tolerant society (Chambers / Kopstein 2001: 837, 845).

A second argument in the debate on the dark side of civil society is that many CSOs themselves do not live up to their noble motives and idealist ostensible claims. In fact, critics argue that they may be marked by unbalanced internal hierarchies, undemocratic or exclusionary membership, a lack of transparency and accountability or else. This disparity between the

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22 This argument was also postulated by Putnam differentiating between the bridging (inclusive) and bonding (exclusive) features of social capital (Putnam 2000).
2.2 Civil society organizations (CSOs)

organizations’ mostly charitable objectives and their internal behavior and legitimization has been criticized for instance regarding professional NGOs. Especially large and transnationally working organizations have been on the watch by analysts advising against their lack of democratic legitimization, transparency, and accountability (Anheier / Hawkes 2008, Ishkanian 2008, Mercer 2002, Murphy 2011). For Murphy, this dark side of civil society is best illustrated by viewing some of the most well-known and powerful international NGOs which show that the civil society sector is equally prone to elite domination and power concentration as other sectors – through questionable cooperations, their closeness to governments and a supposed alienation from their founding missions (Murphy 2011: 254). In a literature review on »NGOs, civil society and democratization«, Mercer (Mercer 2002) shows how common normative views on CSOs are challenged through their diverse outcomes and contributions to democracy in practice (Mercer 2002: 19f). Anheier / Hawkes exemplarily expose the disparities regarding accountability and power legitimation referring to the example of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation whose budget in certain working areas exceeds that of the World Health Organization (Anheier / Hawkes 2008: 131). They refer to the »moral accountability« of NGOs which, if they seek to promote noble values, must themselves »be democratically organized and soundly governed« (Anheier / Hawkes 2008: 136).

With reference to CSOs in nondemocratic regimes, authors on the dark side tend to argue that often such anti-democratic values may even be more frequent and strong among CSOs in nondemocratic settings. In particular, they refer to the risks associated with particularistic groups, nationalist extremist tendencies, ethnic discrimination, and violence up to genocide. (Chambers / Kopstein 2011, Kaldor / Kostovicova 2008, Mann 2005, Roth 2003). Common examples include nationalist organizations in Russia or Belarus, extreme Islamist organizations in Iran and Saudi Arabia up to violent youth gangs endangering public security in Latin America (Ishkanian 2008: 70f, Kaldor / Kostovicova 2008: 96). A second argument is that particularly external democracy promotion is also likely to foster »genetically engineered civil societies« (Ishkanan 2008: 72) within nondemocratic settings. These foreign-funded CSOs may ostensibly promote Western values and democracy but risk to lack internal democracy, transparency and, not least, popular representation within the groups they pretend to represent.

Nonetheless, the debate on the dark side of CSOs is highly contested itself. Opposing voices would not even include many of the cited
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organizations in their definition of civil society, claiming that these do not meet civil society’s fundamental characteristics such as civility, tolerance or non-violence (Rucht 2009, Bob 2011). On the other hand, it seems nearly impossible to judge the variety of possible and existing organizations according to these principles without risking a proper bias – particularly when talking about political contexts other than liberal democracy.

Concerning the study of CSOs in nondemocratic regimes, this second approach found in global third sector studies stands out for its more open and pragmatic perspective and an in-depth study of different forms and expressions of organizations in different kinds of regimes. The weakness, however, is its restrictive focus, as most studies tend to be micro-level approaches restricted on the empirical study of organizations without further exploring general regime structures. More precisely, they lack the theoretical reference to the study of nondemocratic regimes that would facilitate a contextualization of the findings to the overall political context.

2.2.3.3 The regime approach: Civic organization in authoritarian regimes

»Most authoritarian regimes, however, like other regimes, seek to legitimate themselves and control the populace by at least quasi-voluntary means. The main voluntary mechanism is co-optation in which individuals and groups in return for particularized substantive privileges (contract concessions, favourable wages, social security benefits) give to the regime generalized political support and/or acquiescence. The key to co-optation is that the co-opted become dependent on the regime for the flow of particular privileges for which they trade their political rights; the surrender of political rights in turn removes a crucial form of check on governments.« (Malloy 1992: 240)

A third approach broaching the issue of CSOs in nondemocratic settings can be found in (comparative) research on authoritarian regimes (Arendt 1967, Gerschewski 2013, Kailitz / Köllner 2013, Linz 2009). After decades of focusing on democratization, research on autocracy has recently regained attention within comparative politics – inspired through an attested »democratic rollback« (Diamond 2008) and the proliferation of different kinds of nondemocratic regimes worldwide. In comparison to the predominantly normative civil society approach that studies CSOs as agents of democratization or the sociologic micro-perspective on organizations forwarded within global third sector studies, the focus here is on the interaction and embeddedness of civic organization within nondemocratic regime structures.
Traditional approaches focusing on the comparative study of authoritarian regimes tended to perceive civil society as usually weak if not inexistent (Wischermann 2013: 326). Scholars rather classified civic organization as an integral part of the political regime and the authoritarian order and, if all, studied traditional organizations (such as labor unions or political parties) and their acting within a space they perceived as largely controlled by the authoritarian state (Linz 2009, O’Donnell 1973). However, as outlined earlier, since the late 1990s we can witness a renaissance of research on autocracy (Diamond 2008, Hadenius / Teorell 2006, Kailitz / Köllner 2013, Schedler 2009). The new approaches stand in contrast to the traditional focus on socio-economic development or ideology and terror as main explanatory factors (Gerschewski 2013: 17). Instead, they tend to center on institutions and focus on »cooptation and strategic repression« as main explanatory factors for the stability of authoritarian regimes (Gerschewski 2013: 16f). In the 21st century, authoritarian rulers face new challenges, particularly an increasing pressure to liberalize in the context of worldwide globalization and interconnectedness (Kaldor / Kostovicova 2008: 86).

Against this background, Gerscheswki conceptualizes three pillars of stability in present nondemocratic regimes (Gerschewski 2013). Firstly, coercion remains a traditional means to subject the people via the use of force. According to Davenport, repression is the »actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities« (Davenport 2007, cited in Gerschewski 2013: 48). A second pillar of stability is cooptation, meaning »the capacity to tie strategically-relevant actors (or a group of actors) to the regime elite« (Gerschewski 2013: 22). Moreover, third, legitimation refers to »the process of gaining support« (Gerschewski 2013: 18) to foster recognition and satisfaction within the regime. Particularly the second and third pillars anticipate a more multifaceted study of civic organization under nondemocratic regime structures. Schedler summarizes:

»In general terms, authoritarian rulers either work towards the subordinate organization of societal interests, the disorganization of societal actors, or the competitive division of civil society« (Schedler 2009).

Several authors have made the attempt to study civil society and the interaction between organizations and the authoritarian state in particular nondemocratic regimes (Cavatorta 2013, Giersdorf / Croissant 2011, Grodsky 2012, Heurlin 2009, Liverani 2008, Robertson 2009, Wischermann 2013). Envisaging the case of Vietnam, Wischermann (Wischermann 2013) stud-
ies how autocratic structures and values within civil society actors themselves let them – to varying degrees – support nondemocratic regime structures. Giersdorf / Croissant study civil society in competitive authoritarian regimes structures in Malaysia. They point out the ambiguity of organizations of which some – due to cooptation through the authoritarian state, assimilation or religious fanaticism – are likely to strengthen the present authoritarian order (Giersdorf / Croissant 2011). Similarly, Liverani shows how service provision in welfare structures has a stabilizing effect on authoritarian regime structures for Algeria (Liverani 2008).

A first common feature in these studies is their focus on institutions and state structures and their reaction to the increasing pressure of liberalization and global exchange (see Heurlin 2009). Autocratic rulers today cannot just simply repress civil society, but tend to develop different ways in how to deal with it. Against this background, Robertson (Robertson 2009) describes in his work on Russian civil society how contemporary autocratic rulers try to monitor the diverse landscape of organizations:

> Many contemporary authoritarians face a different environment from their twentieth century predecessors, and this has led to considerable innovation in the repertoire of repressive techniques that they employ. (…). The result is a strengthening of groups with a nonpolitical or pro-state orientation and the isolation of more adversarial groups or organizations. Within a political system that is a hybrid of open competition and authoritarian control, the Russian authorities are constructing a hybrid system of state-society relations in which independent organizations are allowed to exist, but where they compete with state-supported groups on a highly unequal basis.« (Robertson 2009: 531f).

Second, these recent approaches have found civil society to be existent but ambiguous in nondemocratic settings (see Alagappa 2004, Cavatorta / Durac 2010, Cavatorta 2013, Jamal 2007, Park 2011). CSOs in nondemocratic regimes may also perform multiple roles and have different effects on the status quo of the regime, including its direct or indirect support (purposely or not). According to Warren, »tribal or religious organizations may function as informal monitors and enforcers for governments« (Warren 2011: 386) and serve as a »means for organizing the systematic corruption of a political system« (Warren 2011: 386). Similarly, Giersdorf / Croissant point out that CSOs may indirectly support an autocratic regime by simply adapting to the given rules and conditions. They state that:

> as long as civil society activists articulate their demands within the institutional framework, these may unintentionally function as a feedback mechanism, thereby strengthening the autocratic regime« (Giersdorf / Croissant 2011:15).
Furthermore, these recent findings for civic organization in present non-democratic regimes are supported through several approaches that, often in retrospect, focus on (past) dictatorships trying to explain their success or duration (Allen 1965, Arendt 1967, Berman 1997, Gramsci 1971, Ko-shar 1987). Altogether these historic studies show that certain forms of CSOs have always existed under past dictatorships – although, however, varying sharply from our present notion of civil society. The Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci 1971), arrested by the Italian fascists in the 1930s, tried to understand how these could become so popular in Italy. He saw »civil society as a space for the struggle of cultural hegemony« (Reichhardt 2004: 41). As a part of the state (political society), CSOs for Gramsci were a »key intermediary in assuring the preservation of the existing hegemonic order« (Murphy 2011: 253) – independent from its democratic quality. In an often cited article, Berman tries to show that not the absence of civil society but a strong associational network and a high degree of mobilization during the Weimar Republic led to the final decline of democracy (Berman 1997: 408). According to her mind, civil society eventually formed »the backbone of the Nazis’ grassroots propaganda machine« (Berman 1997: 420). The economic crisis and mistrust in political institutions had made people turn away from public institutions and organize within civil society – which was fragmented, and »occurred within rather than across group lines« (Berman 1997: 411), strengthened cleavages and mobilized people outside and against the political system (Berman 1997: 411). Berman states that the example of the Weimar Republic shows how »absent strong and responsive political institutions, an increasingly active civil society may serve to undermine rather than strengthen, a political regime« (Berman 1997: 402).

Similarly, other authors have illustrated how (often de-political) associationism in different historic settings strengthened antidemocratic tendencies, political distance and subservience (Kaufmann 2002, Weber 1988). A prominent example is Max Weber’s parody on monarchs’ preferences for choirs and their »positive political influence on their members« turning them into good, passive citizens (Roth 2003: 71).

By and large, this third field of research highlights that CSOs may »represent both opportunity and peril« for nondemocratic rulers (Heurlin 2009: 226). Furthermore, it points to the importance of context. Researchers try to break up the symbiotic connection between civil society and democracy and focus on the relation between CSOs and the regime in which they operate. Giersdorf / Croissant conclude that the inability of many CSOs under authoritarian rule »to effectively challenge autocratic incumbents is
largely related to the institutional settings in which civil society groups must act« (Giersdorf / Croissant 2011: 16). Instead of distinguishing between good and bad CSOs that either foster or challenge democracy, this perspective envisages CSOs as part of the regime context in which they organize. By pointing to the issue of context-dependency, these approaches contribute to the jigsaw in the study of CSOs in nondemocratic regimes. A weakness, however, is their predominant institutionalist perspective; scholars focusing on comparative regime research tend to analyze organizations with a view to the state and its institutions while risking to oversee their societal embeddedness, popular support and socio-cultural evolution.

2.2.4 Conclusion: Context matters!

»Apparently it still depends on the specific character of the respective field of association, of its very political culture whether it sustains liberal democracies on the one hand or promotes authoritarian regimes on the other.« (Reichardt 2004: 63)

The outlined state of the art shows that civil society is a vague and contested concept that tends to be thought and studied together with democracy. Against this background, research on CSOs in contexts other than liberal democracy remains less frequent and often lacks theoretical grounding and systematic approaches. In recent years, however, research on CSOs is diversifying and expanding on a global scale. Three research areas that somehow broach the issue of CSOs in nondemocratic regimes have been made out: First, research related to the concept’s revival in the transition processes of the third wave and dominated by a normative analysis of CSOs as agents of democratization. Second, rather sociological approaches focusing on down-to-earth and micro-level analyses of the third sector and its heterogeneity in different kinds of political regimes worldwide – that often lack a theoretically grounded analysis of regime structures. Third, we can find state-centered, institutional approaches to civic organization in comparative research on authoritarian regimes.

Taken together, three central arguments arise. First of all, if we study CSOs in nondemocratic settings we have to start with a broad concept of civil society. Empiricism has shown that CSOs can be found in all kinds of regimes other than liberal democracy, but that they may not meet our normative and western-biased expectations. Against this background, scholars already raised the claim to open up our understanding and study
2.3 Synthesis

CSOs as neither »per se democratic« nor »bound to democracy« (Zinecker 2011: 6). Second, evidence from nondemocratic regimes shows that CSOs may perform multiple roles and functions and even might be rather neutral »with regard to the type of political order it (they) could promote« (Chambers / Kopstein 2001: 854). Against the often made dichotomous distinction, the choice is not between good association (participation) and no association at all (isolation) but between different types of participation (Chambers / Kopstein: 838, 854) as »civil society itself has multiple meanings« (Bob 2011: 218). Last, taken together all of these studies point to the fact that »context is all-important« (Mercer 2002: 14) for the shape of CSOs and the role they play within a political regime.

2.3 Synthesis

The preceding sections outlined the current state of the art of both research on hybrid regimes and CSOs, guided by the thesis’ particular research interest. As a last step, this chapter summarizes the extracted research gaps, specifies the proper definitions used in this thesis and derives some core assumptions. Thereby, it synthesizes the theoretical background for the following analysis of CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua.

2.3.1 Research gaps

Current literature on hybrid regimes point to the increasing relevance of this ambiguous regime type as a subject of investigation within democratization studies and comparative politics. Scholarly approaches tend to follow quantitative and conceptual designs that have paved the way for the characterization of hybrid regimes and, not least, document their proliferation and political relevance. However, these approaches tend to be less explanatory when it comes to defining the practical reasons for the stability and persistence of hybrid regimes worldwide. At the same time, the field of qualitative studies envisaging one or more particular countries is limited and lacks a grounded theoretical framing that would allow for analytical generalizations and conclusions. Also, research on hybrid regimes so far tends to focus on the state and its institutions while neglecting the exploration of culture and societal and micro-level structures and actors. By and large, there is a lack of empirical studies that undertake in-depth, qualitative approaches to study particular countries while basing
their analysis on an explicit theoretical framing as hybrid regimes. Furthermore, a focus on societal structures and non-state actors – in particular CSOs – may open up new factors likely to initiate or prevent change in hybrid regimes.

The concept of civil society, at the same time, tends to be closely related to the idea of Western liberal democracy – although empiricism has stated the existence of civic organizations all over the world. The rise of third sector studies has been pushing research on CSOs in different kinds of political regimes. Still, literature on CSOs in nondemocratic settings and particularly hybrid regimes remains imprecise and often lacks theoretical framing. As a look at the current state of the art illustrates, approaches to CSOs and non-democracy tend to underlie different constraints. First, there is a prevalent transitional perspective focusing on the role of CSOs’ as pioneers and supporters of democratic transformation and consolidation. Based on the overall normative concept of civil society, these studies risk excluding many of the practically-existing organizations in hybrid regimes a priori. Furthermore, other approaches to CSOs in nondemocratic regimes tend to restrict their focus to a single level of analysis. They either fail to integrate their exploration of CSOs (micro-level) in an analysis of regime structures (macro-level) or focus on the regime-level and the state as a central figure while neglecting the societal and cultural background. Particularly regarding hybrid regimes, there is a research gap in studies bringing together empirical research on CSOs with a theoretically embedded analysis of regime structures.

This thesis builds up on these outlined research desiderata by bringing together research on CSOs and on hybrid regimes. An in-depth single case study of the Nicaraguan CSO sector and its relation and embeddedness in the hybrid regime context will contribute to fill existing research gaps at the intersection of both fields.

2.3.2 Definitions

As outlined in the previous chapters, hybrid regime is often used as a generic term to denote different kinds of ambiguous regimes. Encompassing conceptualizations include all kinds of defective democracies and liberalized authoritarian states, countries in transition and with diverse historical backgrounds that cannot be assigned to neither the liberal-democratic nor the authoritarian end. However, for the purpose of this thesis a more narrow definition is employed. Based on the conceptualization as a regime
type sui generis, hybrid regimes are defined as marked by three criteria; their evolution in the third wave of democratization (context); an ambiguous political nature combining formal democratic features with autocratic practices (features); and their non-transitional character due to their persistence and stability over time (perspective). The reasons for this restriction lie in the ambition to account for the term’s specific context of origin and evolution and the need to avoid further conceptual confusion through an extensive use and application. Besides, the aim of this thesis is not to explore hybrid regimes as defective or inferior systems based on a normative evaluation and comparison to liberal democracies. Instead, the focus of research will be inspired by a case-specific exploration of the practical arrangements of this regime type and the reasons for its proliferation and persistence.

Concerning the conceptualization of CSOs Salamon / Anheier define them as organized, private, and self-governing actors that are nonprofit-distributing and noncompulsory (Taylor 2011: 1, referring to Salamon / Anheier 1992). Following an open and pragmatic approach as suggested by Zinecker (Zinecker 2011), in this thesis the concept is used as a generic term for all kinds of non-profit oriented, charitable social organizations that fit the following criteria. First, they have to dispose of a minimum degree of organization and longevity – therefore excluding individuals and loose social movements or ad hoc coalitions. Moreover, given the particular research interest and due to research pragmatic reasons, these furthermore have to pursue certain transformations of society beyond their individual membership. Thereby, the study explicitly excludes the variety of – at least from their theoretical conceptualization – rather apolitical membership organizations such as sports or recreation clubs. In practice and for the selected case of Nicaragua this restricts the sector under study to national and international NGOs, foundations, trade unions, and different kinds of (often rather informal) associations. The idea behind this pragmatic approach is to avoid an a priori exclusion of practically existing actors that do not fit into the dominant Western liberal concept of civil society.

Furthermore, in differentiation from prevalent normative approaches to civil society, this thesis defines CSOs as not always and inherently civil, benevolent and pro-democratic and in their existence »not bound to democracy« (Zinecker 2011: 6). Rather, based on the existing literature on CSOs and their functions, their normative conceptualization as well as their dark side, we can derive a set of factors crucial for identifying CSOs’ potential to promote democratic change. First, their proper democratic ori-
2. Theoretical considerations

entation, i.e. their objectives, their understanding of democracy and their self-perception. Second, their internal organization, i.e. their (democratic and transparent) organizational structures, their membership, their openness, and their representativeness or representation within the local population. Third, their autonomy from third actors and pressures, i.e. their funding sources, potential sponsors and their relation to the at least partially autocratic state. All of these factors have been taken into consideration in the structuring of the guide for the interviews with CSO leaders in the second part of the study.

2.3.3 Further procedure

Based on the outlined desiderata, the following study attempts to explore the interrelation between CSOs and hybrid regime structures. On the one hand, it contributes to the understanding of hybrid regimes, their functioning and the reasons for their stability and persistence. On the other, it also enforces the understanding and conceptualization of CSOs in contexts other than liberal democracy, the particular challenges they face and the particular roles they may assume in a hybrid regime context.

As already outlined in the introduction, the thesis centers on a qualitative single case study of CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua. It explores the manifestation of hybrid regime structures, the challenges CSOs face in this particular regime context and tries to classify the Nicaraguan CSO sector according to the organizations’ functions, embeddedness and positioning within the regime: CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua: challenging or maintaining the status quo?

The theoretical background inspired the following considerations that underlie the research interest and empirical study of CSOs in Nicaragua:

- First of all, based on their natural characteristics, hybrid regimes are likely to show an ambiguous attitude and pose particular challenges towards civic organization.
- Second, based on the predominant normative perspective on civil society, a vivid and strong CSO sector is likely to foster democratization processes and change within hybrid regimes. Given their democratic-participatory functions, CSOs seem to be designed to help to close the gap between formal democratic structures and autocratic practices.
- Third, a closer look at current empirical studies and alternative approaches, however, points to a more diverse and uncertain nature of civic organization under autocratic rule. CSOs may be embedded dif-
ferently into regime structures, suffer from the particular given challenges, and may, as a consequence, actually produce diverse outcomes regarding the status quo of a regime.

- Lastly, this makes the interrelation between a hybrid regime context and CSOs a fruitful (but so far neglected) object of investigation with benefits for both democratization studies and civil society research.

The further process of the thesis will be as follows: The next chapters sketch the applied methods and concrete research steps (3.) and introduce the selected case of Nicaragua and its scholarly exploration so far (4.). Chapters 5-7 summarize the empirical findings consecutively, starting with the practical manifestation of hybrid regime structures in Nicaragua (5.), and then outlining the challenges faced by CSOs (6.). This main part concludes with a classification of the Nicaraguan CSO sector according to the CSOs’ ambition and capability to challenge the existing hybrid regime structures and promote democratic change (7.). The discussion (8.) critically discusses the empirical findings with a view to the theoretical considerations outlined in this chapter. The conclusion (9.) summarizes the results, critically reflects the research process and provides an outlook on the country’s future perspectives.
3. Research design

The translation of research interests and preliminary theoretical assumptions into an adequate research design presents a necessary but challenging step in socio-scientific studies. The present chapter outlines this operationalization of the overall research interest in the roles and functions of civil society organizations in hybrid regimes, introducing the different steps of research and the applied methods. It starts by justifying the selection of a qualitative approach centered on the single case of Nicaragua and split into two parts, a background analysis and a consecutive set of interviews with leaders of selected CSOs (3.1). It then introduces the chosen methods of data collection and sketches the selection of interview partners and the difficulties encountered during the field study in Nicaragua (3.2). Chapter 3.3 describes the methods applied for data evaluation based on the model of qualitative content analysis, referring as well to the software MAXQDA used for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis.

3.1 A qualitative approach

To begin with, the following sections briefly sketch the logic of qualitative research, summarize the reasons for choosing Nicaragua as a single case and present the concrete translation of the research interest into guiding questions for the empirical field study in Nicaragua.

3.1.1 Qualitative case studies

It is only in the last decades that the use of qualitative methods has become common and widely accepted in political science. It evolved as a response or critique of general transformations in a field dominated by quantitative research since the behaviorist revolution in the 1950s and 1960s (Blatter 2007: 18). The dispersion of qualitative research can be seen as an expression of a new interest in informal structures and cognitive processes and a revaluation of meaning and context, more precisely the request to analyze »causal mechanisms« (Blatter 2007: 133) rather than direct causal effects such as assessed through large-scale quantitative research designs.
3.1 A qualitative approach

(Blatter 2007: 17f, 133). While these try to identify »statistically significant relationships between variables«, qualitative approaches »can make visible and unpick the mechanisms which link particular variables« (Barbour 2008: 11).

The categorical distinction made between quantitative and qualitative approaches by advocates of both paradigms often seems to be factitious and has recently been diluted through the use of multiple or mixed method designs. We can, however, still make out certain attributes characteristic of qualitative research designs. Qualitative research in the social sciences has become known to be more flexible and explorative and also open for modification and adjustment of focuses during the research process while taking first findings into account. Qualitative studies usually tend to generate theories rather than test already formulated ones and are characterized by the use of interpretative, soft methods, such as one-to-one interviews, focus groups, or participant observation. Due to their focus on profundity rather than width and comparability, there is a tendency to small-n samples or even single case studies. Accordingly, qualitative designs require a deliberate case selection in contrast to the standardized forms commonly applied in quantitative approaches. (Blatter 2007: 24)

One of its most prominent advocates, Robert Yin, defines case study research by the aim to derive an »in-depth understanding of a single or small number of cases (...) hopefully resulting in a new learning about real-world behavior and its meaning« (Yin 2012: 4). The focus lies on profound analyses and the description and interpretation of structures and processes (Blatter 2007: 127). It allows to draw analytic generalizations (as distinguished from statistical ones) by »using a study’s theoretical framework to establish a logic that might be applicable to other situations« (Yin 2012: 18).

3.1.2 Selecting a case: Nicaragua

In this thesis, the decision for a qualitative research design centered on the case of Nicaragua was based on both methodological reasons and regarding content.

The overall research interest was not in testing already established hypotheses but rather in generating theory in an underexplored research field, namely the interdependencies between a hybrid regime context and the challenges and roles of CSOs. Accordingly, I found to best embrace the research interest by a qualitative analysis of regime-hybridity and
CSOs restricted to a single case (Nicaragua). This approach fits the thesis’ exploratory character and aims at providing in-depth insights that will also allow for analytic generalizations about the interaction of CSOs and context which could later be tested in comparative or larger-n analyses.

Nicaragua was selected as a case for the study of CSOs in hybrid regimes due to three particular reasons. First, because Central America can be seen as a prototype region regarding the concept of hybrid regimes. All countries except for Costa Rica are typical third wave states characterized by a relatively quick institutionalization of formal democratic structures in the 1980s and 1990s, little pre-authoritarian democratic experience, and a current disillusion and problems referring to autocratic legacies. These developments were already diagnosed by Karl who first introduced the term hybrid regime in scientific discussion with her often cited article on »The Hybrid Regimes of Central America« (Karl 1995).

Second, Nicaragua stands out as a case due to its relatively well mobilized CSO sector. Its revolutionary history together with its longstanding experience as a recipient of international development assistance even made the country world champion as measured by the number of NGOs and inhabitants in the 1990s (Kurz 2010: 62).

The third reason for choosing Nicaragua was a more pragmatic one – deriving from the author’s previous knowledge of the country and not least relatively safe working conditions compared to the neighboring countries (e.g., El Salvador, Honduras or Guatemala) where exploding crime rates obstruct the research process and the accessibility of interview partners.

3.1.3 Procedure: A field study split in two phases

The specific research interest together with the relatively low number of empirical studies on Nicaragua suggested splitting the field study into two consecutive parts; a central background analysis focusing on the interdependence of regime-hybridity and CSOs in Nicaragua, complemented by interviews with leaders of selected organizations.

The background study aimed at collecting information on the practical arrangement of regime-hybridity in Nicaragua with a view to the situation of CSOs (RQ 1), the challenges they face (RQ 2) and the sector’s general characteristics (RQ 3). The methods used here embrace background interviews with experts on CSOs and democracy in Nicaragua and a preceding literature analysis of the limited set of already existing studies. Serving to
generate background knowledge and disclose unexplored interdependencies it had a deliberately exploratory character. Guiding questions for this first part of the study were:

- How do hybrid regime structures manifest themselves in Nicaragua, with a particular view to the working conditions of CSOs?
- Which role do CSOs play in the democratization and modernization of society?
- Which specific challenges do CSOs face in the current regime context?
- How can we characterize and classify the Nicaraguan CSO sector?
- How is the concept of civil society discussed in Nicaragua?

These guiding questions were translated into a concrete interview guide including major and sub-questions. Minor modifications were made while taking the varying backgrounds of the different interview partners into consideration (for the concrete interview questions see Appendix).

The findings on regime-hybridity and Nicaraguan CSOs collected in the background study were then complemented by a consecutive set of interviews with leaders from selected CSOs. This second part of the study was planned with the goal to deepen the insight into the specific features of the Nicaraguan CSO sector, its major wings and representatives (RQ 3 and RQ 4). The research interest lay on the organizations’ evolution, their members, their self-perception as CSOs, their motivation, agenda and their evaluation of the present political context.

Drawing on the experts’ previous classifications, I was able to select three samples of CSOs, reflecting three major wings within the Nicaraguan CSO sector. These groups of CSOs do not primarily differ in their organizational status or thematic field but rather in their general attitude towards the political context and their positioning in the present regime structures. Here, I again recurred on semi-structured interviews, undertaken with leaders from the three samples of CSOs. This organizational analysis was complemented by documents provided by the interview partners on the work, structure and history of their organizations.

With a view to the highly politicized context in Nicaragua and the intricate research situation, the interview guide was constructed more flexible and open than in the first part of the study, and the concrete questions had to be individualized for each of the three groups (see section 3.2.3 on difficulties). The guiding questions concerned:
3. Research design

- The organizations’ evolution, agenda, and working strategies
- Their internal structure; members, co-operation and alliances
- Their leaders’ perception of major challenges and their evaluation of the present regime context
- Their proper concept of civil society

Interviews and collected data from both parts of the study were later consecutively analyzed based on the paradigm of qualitative content analysis and with the help of the computer software MAXQDA.

Figure 2: Research design

![Diagram illustrating the research design](https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845283234)

Source: Author

Figure 2 roughly illustrates the different research steps and their interrelation, from the initial research interest to the interpretation of results. Moreover, it shows the specific value of the single case design, differentiating between case-specific findings and possible analytical generalizations concerning CSOs in hybrid regimes, including the theoretical contribution to the research fields of democratization studies and civil society research.

Further information on the methods used and the selection of samples and interview partners can be found in the following sections on data collection and data evaluation.
3.2 Data collection

The following section describes the methods of data collection applied in the empirical study, centering on semi-structured (expert) interviews. This also includes describing the samples of interview partners and their selection process – for the expert interviews (background study) as well as for the subsequently conducted interviews with CSO leaders.

3.2.1 Methods used

The study at hand is primarily based on semi-structured interviews. Data was collected during a research visit to Nicaragua undertaken between June and September 2013. Based in the capital Managua, I conducted a total of 32 interviews, participated in several activities of CSOs and collected additional material provided by Nicaraguan CSOs, donor agencies, and research institutes. Next to the field study, desktop research and a literature review focusing on recent studies on Nicaraguan democracy and civil society were used to collect additional information.

I chose semi-structured interviews for both parts of the study (expert interviews and interviews with CSO leaders) which embrace its inductive and open approach. Semi-structured interviews are characterized by a guide with open-ended questions whose order might vary in each interview (Roulston 2010: 14f) and which are complemented by »probes seeking further detail and description about what has been said« (Roulston 2010: 15). Guiding questions set the general course of the interview while allowing the interview partner to freely choose what is important to her/him and not being dependent on the researcher’s previously determined answers (Barbour 2008: 17). This interview style allowed collecting general information while still leaving space for unanticipated aspects and discussion.

The first set of interviews is referred to as explorative expert interviews which can be considered a particular version of guided interviews used when little previous knowledge exists on the object of investigation (Kruse 2014: 168f). In this study, their purpose was to generate knowledge about the interdependency of Nicaraguan CSOs and the political context. The term expert is used following Gläser / Laudel’s suggestions for a broad understanding of the term (Gläser / Laudel 2010: 13). Being an expert in this view is not categorically bound to a certain vocational status or scientific knowledge but as well refers to the interview partner’s
knowledge as a participant or person concerned. The selected experts included journalists, scholars, and representatives from foreign donor organizations as well as representatives of CSOs. Furthermore, complementary information was collected and drawn from the scarce set of existing literature (mostly journal articles and country reports provided by foreign donor institutions). This literature review was mainly used for the introductory chapter (4. Introduction to the case), providing additional background information on the history, the political regime and the evolution of civil society in Nicaragua.

The interview partners in the subsequent interviews were leaders from selected CSOs. In this second part of the study the interview guide was more elaborate due to the comparative perspective – aiming at identifying differences between the perspectives and evaluations of the interviewed CSO leaders.

As for the specific procedure of the interviews, they are geared to the common recommendation in pertinent handbooks (e.g., Gläser / Laudel 2010: 144ff). While each interview was originally planned to last about one hour, they varied immensely in practice according to the time and disposition of the interview partners. I started each interview with a brief presentation of the research interest, usually followed by a short ice-breaking question about the interviewee’s history and position in the organization. Interviews ended with a question for further important issues that had not been mentioned in the interview and a request for ideas concerning further interview partners. All of the interviews were – in accordance and with permission of the interviewees – recorded with a voice recorder and later transcribed with the help of the transcription software. 30 interviews were conducted in Spanish, two in German (with native Germans). For publication, the names of all interviewees and their organizations / institutions have been rendered anonymous.

These can in a broad sense be referred to as experts as well, as they are interesting not as individuals but as representatives for a certain perspective of their organization or group of CSOs (see Kruse 2014: 168f).

Note: The two parts of the study are methodologically separated and were planned as consecutive steps. However, in practice the second phase of interviews partly overlapped with the background study due to pragmatic reasons such as the availability of interview partners.
3.2 Data collection

3.2.2 Selection of interview partners

3.2.2.1 Part I: Background study (expert interviews)

A twofold strategy was applied to get a mixed sample of interviewees for the background study (not to compare but to widen the perspectives). I started with a review of publications on Nicaragua and a specific search for editors and authors publishing on Nicaraguan civil society. In addition to that, I conducted two pretest interviews with previously established contacts, asking for recommendations regarding possible interview partners and experts on civil society. These included one interview with two representatives of a major, well-known CSO highly networked and integrated within the sector and one with two representatives of a major foreign donor organization.

Based on this preliminary information, four relevant groups of experts on Nicaraguan civil society could be established: (1) Scholars from universities and research institutes in Nicaragua; (2) representatives of foreign donor organizations known as experts and authors of publications on Nicaraguan civil society; (3) journalists and consultants (people working as consultants for organizations and/or the government in specific areas); and (4) representatives from CSOs with long-time experience in the field. The inclusion of CSO representatives was already recommended by the pretest interview partners in this first part of the study, who suggested taking CSO representatives into account as experts on insider know-how on the civil society sector, its structure and the challenges it faces. Always having a balanced consideration of the four established expert groups in mind, I then started my interviews with contacts derived from the first two interviews and proceeded with snowball sampling. Each interview concluded with the request for recommendations on further interview partners and served to replenish the growing list of potential interview candidates. The first contact with interviewees was usually established via email, if possible referring to recommendations by

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25 According to Cohen / Crabtree snowball sampling involves utilizing well informed people to identify critical cases or informants who have a great deal of information about a phenomenon. The researcher follows this chain of contacts in order to identify and accumulate critical cases. Often a few key informants or cases will be mentioned multiple times and take on additional importance.« (Cohen / Crabtree 2006)
preceding interview partners, and included a standard short description of
the project and my motivation. If requests remained without reply, a sec-
ond attempt was made via phone calls or recurring on the often offered
help by previous interviewees.

Altogether the access to potential interview partners was mixed. Donor
organizations and big institutions turned out to be quite easy to contact via
e-mail or contact data on their websites and offices. Establishing contact
was easy as well when done with the help of previously interviewed ex-
erts. More difficulties arose when trying to contact smaller institutions
and organizations or individual experts without external help, first and
foremost due to the widespread informality and bad equipment and facili-
ties of many organizations, including the lack of conventional telephone
networks. Generally, contact is best done via e-mail in Nicaragua or, if
available, mobile phones – as office locations seem to change rapidly and
the lack of street names and adequate maps even in the capital Managua
usually poses a challenge for external researchers. However, once contacts
were established, the overall response of requested interviewees was good
and interest in the research idea and willingness to participate very high.
On the whole, about 30 experts and institutions were contacted, out of
which 19 could be interviewed while the remaining did not answer at all
or canceled due to difficulties to agree upon an appointed day and time.

The sample:

Group 1 / scholars: The interviewed scholars are all working or have
formerly been working at Nicaraguan Universities, covering the fields of
political science, sociology, and philosophy. All have published on either
the topic of civil society in Nicaragua or the country’s general democratic
development since 1979. Besides, all maintain regular contact with differ-
et CSOs established during own research projects. From a scientific point
of view, this group of experts was crucial to recieve an academic perspec-
tive on the topic. The interviewed scholars provided essential information
on the classification of Nicaraguan CSOs and insights into the diachronic
development of the sector, next to constituting an important source for fur-
ther advice on relevant publications and statistical data.

Group 2 / donors: The second group of experts was made up of repre-
sentatives from major foreign donor organizations, including international
NGOs as well as close-state development agencies. All are cooperating
with local partner organizations and dispose of a long experience in the
country. In addition to that, the interviewed staff used to have a specific
interest in and overall knowledge of the sector. This group was crucial to
3.2 Data collection

get an outsider’s view on Nicaraguan CSOs and an insight into the situation and interests of donors.

Table 3: Interview partners (background study)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview groups</th>
<th>Experts</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview (no.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1: Scholars</td>
<td>Prof. (sociology)</td>
<td>23/07/2013</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prof. (sociology)</td>
<td>02/07/2013</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prof. (philosophy)</td>
<td>20/08/2013</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director (research institute)</td>
<td>07/08/2013</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2: Donors</td>
<td>Foreign embassy</td>
<td>13/06/2013</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Donor organization</td>
<td>03/09/2013</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Donor organization</td>
<td>11/07/2013</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Donor organization</td>
<td>31/07/2013</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Donor organization</td>
<td>20/06/2013</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3: Journalists &amp; consultants</td>
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<td>15/07/2013</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>08/07/2013</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>26/07/2013</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4: CSO leaders</td>
<td>CSO (rights)</td>
<td>14/06/2013</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CSO (transparency)</td>
<td>20/06/2013</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CSO (environment)</td>
<td>11/06/2013</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CSO (gender)</td>
<td>16/07/2013</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CSO (investigation/analysis)</td>
<td>24/06/2013</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CSO (women)</td>
<td>23/08/2013</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author

Group 3 / journalists & consultants: The third group consisted of individuals known as experts for their particular knowledge on CSOs and/or the political situation in the country. They usually have gained their expertise in their daily work as journalists or consultants for public institutions and CSOs in different working fields, often with close contacts to CSOs or as proper former CSO leaders. This group of experts was selected to obtain a critical perspective on the situation in different specific working fields of CSOs and to learn about common criticisms on CSOs and the overall standing of the sector.
Group 4 / CSO leaders: The last group included leaders from major civil society organizations covering some of the most important working fields in Nicaragua (environment, women, rights, rural development). They were selected following recommendations of other interviewees for experts from organizations with specific knowledge or lifelong experience of work in the sector. Chosen were either CSO directors or other members particularly recommended as experts on the general history of CSOs in Nicaragua, their development, and present status quo. This group served to get first insights into the perspectives of civil society itself as compared to the other experts’ evaluations.

3.2.2.2 Part II: Interviews with CSO leaders

For the second part of the study 13 representatives from civil society organizations were interviewed grouped into three samples established based on the preliminary findings. I started with a list of organizations drawn from the background interviews and proceeded with snowball sampling within each of the three established groups. In this case, accessing interesting organizations and establishing contacts proved to be far more difficult. At the same time, the response of requested interviewees was much more reluctant as with the preceding expert interviews. While interest and cooperation was good among group 1, finding access and representatives willing to be interviewed was much more challenging in the other two groups. The reasons for that and further differences will be described together with the general characteristics of the groups in the following description of the sample.

The sample:

Group 1: The first group consisted of those labeled by experts as critical CSOs – referring to their independence from the Nicaraguan government and their critical attitude towards the current regime. Based on the experts’ recommendations, I selected organizations that belong to the largest and most well-known in their field. These include three organizations without legal status; one network organization, one women’s organization, one organization working in the area of democracy promotion, and one human rights NGO. Leaders of these groups were interested in talking about the challenges they face and eager to present their points of view and critical attitudes. Besides they usually showed to be
willing to support research and to report on their situation and country and disposed of previous experience with interview requests.

Group 2: A bit more reluctant was the second group made up of NGOs, mainly focusing on service provision in specific working fields and labeled de-political CSOs by many experts. Regarding their accessibility, these organizations normally dispose of official websites and contact possibilities but, at first, did not respond to interview requests. They seemed to be less interested or hesitant to give interviews while trying to stay away from controversial issues and official statements on the political situation of the country. For this reason only three organizations could be interviewed, one international NGO focusing on rural development and two national NGOs working in the field of health and gender.

Table 4: Interview partners (CSO leaders)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview groups</th>
<th>CSOs</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview (no.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 1: Critical CSOs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSO Network</td>
<td>27/06/2013</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO (human rights)</td>
<td>02/09/2013</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSO (democracy)</td>
<td>09/07/2013</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSO (women)</td>
<td>14/08/2013</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 2: De-political CSOs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International NGO (development)</td>
<td>30/08/2013</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO (health)</td>
<td>27/08/2013</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO (women)</td>
<td>03/09/2013</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 3: Party-loyal CSOs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor union</td>
<td>19/08/2013</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor union</td>
<td>06/08/2013</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPC</td>
<td>09/08/2013</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO (women)</td>
<td>15/08/2013</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO (rural development)</td>
<td>07/08/2013</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor union</td>
<td>30/07/2013</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author

Group 3: Most difficulties, however, arose with the third group, which consisted of traditional Sandinista CSOs including four different trade unions, one local community organization (CPC) and one NGO. These, at
first, gave no response to official requests for interviews and information, even when attempted via donor agencies and partners. After several attempts, contacts could eventually be established only by third persons. There was a striking fear among their members regarding critical questions, accompanied by a certain contempt towards foreign researchers. However, once first contacts had been established through local contacts and participation in events, snowballing started to work out via recommendations. In the end I met with very welcome receptions, a willingness to talk and readiness to help with other interviewees in this group as well.

3.2.3 Problems and pitfalls encountered during data collection

Empirical research theoretically planned from behind the desk commonly encounters difficulties when put into practice. In my case, most obstacles to a smooth and quick realization of the data collection phase arose out of the tense political context and the highly polarized civil society sector in Nicaragua (see chapter 4). In an attempt to assure the traceability and transparency of the research process and reflect unexpected changes in the original research design they will be shortly sketched here – as commonly postulated for qualitative approaches (Kruse 2014: 635ff).

The major obstacle already mentioned in the sample descriptions above was the varying degree of accessibility of interview partners and CSOs due to technical barriers and the high level of informality of some potential interviewees and organizations. Most difficulties would arise with a view to the subsequent interviews with CSO leaders in the second phase of the study, out of the existing prejudices and reservations concerning foreign researchers among particular parts of the sector. This rejection is closely connected to the high degree of politicization of the civil society concept in Nicaragua. As further illustrated in the findings, the use of the term civil society is highly controversial and receives negative connotation particularly among specific groups and institutions. As a result, it became clear that access difficulties to certain groups and requests for anonymization of interviewees and their organizations would delay and complicate the research process. And, furthermore, that in contrast to theoretical-

26 These are often accused of reporting negatively and working for »imperialist« countries (see chapter of results 7.)
methodological recommendations, the second interview guide had to be formulated more cautiously and the word choice adapted to the particular interviewees to avoid polarization and disaffirmation from the outset. In practice this was done by using less politicized terms, avoiding the term civil society but asking for participation and social organizations – while leaving space for a discussion about the terms NGO and civil society at the end of each interview.

In the end these encountered obstacles led to slight changes to the original research design, more precisely an adaptation of the research process to the practical reality and necessities. While the original idea for the second part of the study had been to conduct an organizational analysis – choosing 3-5 exemplary CSOs for an in-depth study of organizational structures – this was discarded due to the lack of time to build mutual trust and gain deeper access. Instead, content wise and pragmatic reasons suggested to grade up the weight and importance of the expert interviews and complement them by a set of individual interviews with CSO leaders, leading to the final research design as illustrated earlier.

3.3 Data evaluation

Tying in with the applied methods of data collection, I chose a model of qualitative content analysis as a method of data evaluation for both interviews and documents. This section shortly introduces the idea of qualitative content analysis and its origin and proceeds with a summary of the usage and advantages of the software MAXQDA used as an auxiliary tool in the analytic process. Last, I briefly describe the concrete procedure and coding process in this study.

3.3.1 Qualitative content analysis

For the analysis and interpretation of the interviews, I chose a procedure loosely based on the ideas of qualitative content analysis – »a method for describing the meaning of qualitative material in a systematic way« (Schreier 2012: 1). The abundant use of the term in the past has led to some conceptual confusion. Indeed, it refers to one (out of many) specific qualitative methods for data analysis that can at least be conceptually distinguished from other methods such as discourse analysis, conversation analysis, or objective hermeneutics (Schreier 2012: 14). Qualitative con-
tent analysis has evolved from quantitative text analysis in the US in the 1920s (Gläser / Laudel 2010: 197). Its development in Germany since the 1980s has been strongly connected to the works of Mayring (Gläser / Laudel 2010: 46, 198) who describes his intention as to »preserve the advantages of quantitative content analysis for a more qualitative text interpretation« (Mayring 2000: 3).

Qualitative content analysis differs from quantitative approaches as its »focus is on latent meaning which is not immediately obvious« (Schreier 2012: 15). While theory and prior research play a minor role than in quantitative analyses, procedure and coding in qualitative content analysis is rather data-driven (Schreier 2012: 16). Analyzed material can be visual and verbal data, collected by yourself (e.g., interviews) or gathered from other sources such as newspapers or the internet (Schreier 2012: 3). Further important characteristics of qualitative content analysis are its systematic approach, its flexibility, and the reduction of data (Schreier 2012: 5). More precisely, it provides the researcher with a tool to analyze his or her material by systematically reducing and re-structuring the script with a view to the research interest (Gläser / Laudel 2010: 200). Practically this is done by extracting information from the original script to work with a reduced part of it (Gläser / Laudel 2010: 271). The analysis is done in several consecutive steps, involving the selection and reduction of the material, the development of a coding frame, the allocation of codes and their interpretation (for a more detailed description see Blatter 76ff, Schreier 2012: 5f). Next to the model developed by Mayring which has encountered much criticism as well (see summary in Kruse 2014: 407ff), other forms of qualitative content analysis have been developed in addition or differentiation from it (see Schreier 2012: 14f).

However, taking up the recommendations for researchers dealing with qualitative approaches suggested by Kruse (2014: 635), the principal concern for qualitative analyses should not be to discuss existent theoretical intricacies but to make the analytic process transparent and understandable. After all, the importance lies in the proper application and adaptation of methods to the particular research design and interest.

3.3.2 CAQDAS / MAXQDA

The analysis of the interviews was done with the help of MAXQDA, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Instead of going into detail on the practical use of the software which can be
studied in various publications (for an overview of the literature see Séror 2005) I will restrict descriptions to a brief introduction to the software’s potential advantages explaining its use for the analysis and commonly cited limitations.

CAQDAS was first developed over 30 years ago but only recently seems to have made a significant step in popularity within qualitative research from various disciplines – as an »alternative to the traditional pen, paper, and scissors approach to handling complex data« (Séror 2005: 322). MAXQDA such as the other most common packages (e.g., Atlas.ti, NVivo) helps researchers to organize, structure or manage audio material, for example interview transcripts, protocols (observations, focus group discussions), or other types of written documents such as newspaper articles (Kuckartz 2010: 12ff). Its major benefit lies in the use of computer capacities for the administration, systematization, and organization of large amounts of data such as derived from a set of qualitative interviews. More precisely, it enables the researcher to search data, filter through data, write memos, link passages, making all steps of analysis more transparent and understandable to third persons. This saves time for the analytical work which still has to be done by the researcher (Séror 2005: 323f). Besides CAQDAS offers extra facilities for the illustration and visualization of results and the general presentation of data.

However, the use of a CAQDAS package also bears risks the researcher has to be aware of. The most cited one is that the computer technology overshadows if not restricts the personal contribution of the researcher, meaning the risk to get lost in the quantity of codes and »disregard the conceptual work of analysis« (Séror 2005: 325). After all, it is still the researcher who has to think, interpret, allocate codes, and not the computer (Kuckartz 2010: 57) – and the software is just a means to facilitate the process and will not »automatically improve research« (Séror 2005: 325).

The specific reasons to choose a CAQDAS package despite these concerns were, first of all, the large amount of interview scripts (in total about 45 hours of interviews) which would have been difficult to organize, structure and manage without assisting software. Second, the possibility offered by MAXQDA\textsuperscript{27} to work at different offices and computers without

\textsuperscript{27} The software MAXQDA was chosen as a package widely used in Germany and after participating in a seminar on CAQDAS during the ECPR Winter Methods School in February 2013 in Vienna.
3. Research design

having to carry around hundreds of printed pages and material. Third, the possibility to include audio data and easily listen to interview passages again during the coding process – which becomes particularly important when working with a foreign language.

3.3.3 The coding process

As common in qualitative approaches, the analysis of interviews from both parts of the study was not led by a priori expectations or predetermined hypotheses. Instead, the explorative research interest in the interaction of Nicaraguan CSOs and hybrid regime structures rather provided »a focus or domain of relevance for conducting the analysis« (Thomas 2006: 239). Practically the analytic process grounded in multiple readings and interpretations of the collected interview transcripts with the aim to identify themes or categories relevant for answering my research question (Thomas 2006: 239, 241). Expert interviews and those with CSO leaders were analyzed consecutively and with slightly different focuses; the former rather served the need to generate background information and general knowledge about the Nicaraguan CSO sector while the latter centered on the individual perspectives and perceptions of the interviewed CSO leaders as representatives of their organizations.

The first step in the analysis of the 19 expert interviews was to reduce the collected transcripts to those passages relevant with view to my research interest. Therefore, I started with a close reading of (a part of) the interview scripts and a parallel development of a rough coding frame loosely based on the guiding questions. The focus in this initial phase was on the allocation of main codes dividing the text into units of coding on Nicaragua’s political regime, general characteristics and the legal framework of the CSO sector, the challenges of CSOs, and the classification of the CSO sector into different groups. While going through the interviews the coding frame could be by and by adapted to and amended by sub-codes emerging from the material. Memos defining and describing their meaning were set up for all the codes. This first step of analysis then concluded with classifying all 19 interviews according to the developed coding frame (Schreier 2012: 5f).

Once the interview scripts had been coded and reduced (as passages irrelevant for the research interest were filtered), I switched to completely inductive coding allowing categories and codes to emerge from the data. The main codes were refined and complemented by further sub-codes, for
example specifying the main code *challenges for CSOs* through the sub-codes *persecution, administrative harassment* or *withdrawal of international cooperation*. In this stage of analysis I used *invivo* codes as well which are »created from actual phrases or meanings in specific text segments« (Thomas 2006: 241).

The third step of analysis consisted of a detailed analysis of the allocated codings (text segments attributed to one code), trying to identify patterns and relationships and establishing different levels of codes. Simultaneously I started to write abstracting memos by collecting direct and indirect quotes and structuring statements and information from the allocated codings. By summarizing and interpreting sub-codes step by step, the structure for the later presentation of findings emerged.

Compared to the first part of the study, the focus in the analysis of the 13 CSO interviews was very much on the individual perspectives and perceptions of the interviewees as representatives of their organization; including for example their motivation, perceived obstacles to their work, or their notion of civil society.

A rough coding frame was again developed departing from the interview guiding questions but open to capture themes and categories that emerged from the transcripts. The particular feature of this analysis was its partly comparative approach; once the coding frame was established, codings from the three groups of interviewees were analyzed for each main code. To give an example, different sub-codes were allocated to the main code *personal motivation*, such as *being part of the Revolution to help* or *civil society as way of life* – already foreshadowing the differences between the three groups of CSOs. Here again the focus was on inductive coding, letting major themes and comparative categories emerge from the interview transcripts to later derive major codes that predetermined the structure of the findings.

Once the analysis of both expert interviews and subsequent interviews with CSO leaders could be concluded, the developed code scheme complemented by the assigned memos facilitated the structuring and writing up of the findings.

Before coming to the study’s results, the following chapter serves as an introduction to the case of Nicaragua, briefly sketching the country’s political-historical background and evolution.
4. Introduction to the case

This chapter provides a short introduction to the selected case of Nicaragua, based on the rather scarce set of hitherto existing studies. Sections 4.1 - 4.3 briefly sketch the country’s political-historical background focusing on the evolution of hybrid regime structures and the present political system. Subsequently sections 4.4 - 4.6 introduce the Nicaraguan civil society sector and its historical evolution, the legal framework of civic organization and the sector’s general characteristics.

4.1 Historical background: From independence to the Sandinista Revolution

The development of formal democratic structures in Nicaragua took a long time, and its setbacks and disruptions have been closely linked to the country’s history, which is marked by foreign occupation and the intervention of external powers. In general, the evolution of formal democracy can be divided into three stages: the fight for liberalization and independence during autocratic rule; the first introduction of democratic structures in the course of the Sandinista Revolution (1979-90); and the consolidation of hybrid regime structures since 1990.

After the end of the Spanish occupation in 1821, new sources of conflict evolved within Nicaraguan society. The emerging power struggle between liberals and conservatives, the rise of a powerful café-oligarchy and the growing influence of the US that culminated in several US interventions throughout the 19th and 20th century (Schobel / Elsemann 2008: 415f) are counted among them. In the 1920s, Augusto César Sandino – a later source of inspiration and eponym for the Sandinista Revolution – became known for his fight against American imperialism and his commitment to freedom and a just social order. Nonetheless, this first glimpse of liberty and hope was wiped out by his assassination in 1934 and the dictatorship that followed it. From 1936 to 1979 the ruling Somoza-clan sought their personal enrichment, were strongly repressive and a large number of the population became impoverished (Reiber 2009: 272). In the 1970s, however, several developments led to a gradual debilitation of the regime in terms of economic strength as well as prestige.
4.1 Historical background: From independence to the Sandinista Revolution

and led to its eventual demise by the popular Revolution. Counting among these are the abysmal crisis management after a major earthquake in 1972 which destroyed large parts of the country’s capital Managua, decreasing support by the US administration under President Carter and finally the assassination of the famous (oppositional) newspaper editor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro in 1978. (Schobel / Elsemann 208: 417f)

As a consequence, popular resistance grew and originated in two major grassroot movements (Walker / Wade 2011: 40ff). On the one side, the FSLN party (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) with a Marxist origin founded in 1961 and named after former freedom fighter Sandino. On the other, a movement of progressive Catholic roots spreading after the second Latin American Bishop’s Conference in 1968 which encouraged the poor and underprivileged to demand and fight for social justice. These two camps brought together diverse societal groups – e.g., students, peasants, workers, middle class, or women – who were eventually able to put the regime under pressure (Walker / Wade 2011: 40ff). By the end of the decade the Sandinistas had taken over the leadership of various oppositional forces, and after a strong military offensive in July 1979, dictator Somoza fled the country (Reiber 2009: 273f).

The Sandinista Revolution of 1979 can be seen as a milestone in Nicaraguan history and marked a moment full of hope and euphoria. Symbolizing the peoples’ power to free themselves and their successful struggle for self-determination and self-organisation, it exerted influence far beyond the borders of the country. The following decade of Sandinista rule was marked by the introduction of formal democratic structures such as the establishment of elections in 1984, the adoption of the Constitution in 1987 and the promotion of political participation and organization of interests (Reiber 2009: 282). Nevertheless, the Sandinistas had their own understanding of democracy and participation, not completely compatible with liberal democracy (Merkel 2010: 219). The revolutionary context was marked by a high level of executive authority and rather weak horizontal accountability (Anderson / Dodd 2009: 147). The promotion of societal organization and mobilization primarily happened top-down with considerable party-political influence and the political space for oppositional groups was restricted (Williams 1994: 173f, 176f). Besides, many of their achievements, such as education and land reform or the successful literacy campaign, were soon challenged or overshadowed by the emerging crises. The US government under Ronald Reagan feared a cubanisation of its backyard Nicaraguan neighbors. Next to stopping all bilateral support, it started building up and financing the Contras.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845295327
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(counterrevolutionaries) who drew the country into civil war (Schobel / Elsemann 2008: 418). By 1987, the Nicaraguan economy was down, inflation high and the population was tired of war. Moreover, the two opposing camps had reached a kind of stalemate in which neither of them seemed to be victorious (Reiber 2009: 276ff). A peace agreement stipulating elections in 1990 was eventually settled in the framework of regional peace efforts in Central America and with cross-national support.

The (historical) construction of the Sandinista Revolution was and remains until today still marked by the at that time tense geopolitical context. Contemporary conservative analysts and actors unanimously classified the period as a »leftist dictatorship« (Merkel 2010: 2019). These voices warned of a socialist danger or, at least, emphasized the revolutionary government’s autocratic structure and adduced repression against those not supporting the Sandinista ideas (e.g., Kirkpatrick 2007, Lecuona 1987). In comparison, sympathizers belonging to the considerable international solidarity movement discussed the Sandinista Revolution as a left alternative if not utopia to existing defective democratic systems (for an overview see Förch 1995). More moderate voices on the left at least praised it as a first successful step on the way to the country’s democratic consolidation (e.g., Guido et al. 1985, Jonas / Stein 1990, Woodford Bray / Dugan Abbassi 1990, Vanden / Prevost 1993). This thesis supports a rather moderate interpretation and agrees with Merkel who classifies the 1980s as a transitional period (Merkel 2010: 2019) whose symbolic significance and impact are perceptible in Nicaraguan society until today.

4.2 The evolution of hybrid regime structures since 1990

The 1990 elections mark another turning point in Nicaraguan history: the end of the civil war and the election defeat of the former revolutionaries represented by the Sandinista party initiated the so-called neoliberal era. In the following years, the institutionalization of democracy was carried

28 The agreements resulted out of the Esquipulas Process, a regional peace initiative initiated by Costa Rica’s president Oscar Arias Sanchez to «resolve interstate conflict and promote regional integration in Central America«. (Wehr / Lederach 1991: 88).
forward by means of constitutional reforms, the formation of political parties and (more or less) democratic elections. However, the country under the successive governments of Violeta Chamorro (Unión Nacional Opositora / UNO: 1990-1996), Arnoldo Alemán (Partido Liberal Constitucionalista / PLC: 1996-2001) and Enrique Bolaños (PLC: 2001-2006) next to overcoming direct war legacies faced serious problems. First of all, the substantial influence of international institutions (IMF, World Bank) whose pressure to privatize state property and reduce public spending not only led to increasing unemployment and inequality but left the national governments with little space for social reforms (Schobel / Elsemann 2008: 419). Second, the already difficult socio-economic situation was worsened by Hurricane Mitch that struck the country in 1998 and caused thousands of deaths and homeless people (Bradshaw 2001, Kampwirth 2003). Moreover, then President Alemán’s administration proved to be corruptive and misappropriated international subsidies originally directed to help reconstruct the country and provide for the victims (Walker / Wade 2011: 71f). Third, all three presidents between 1990 and 2006 faced a strong opposition in the form of the Sandinista party (FSLN) and its leader, still revolutionist Daniel Ortega. The former head of the Sandinista Revolution ran for presidency in each election and although he did not manage to win until 2006 he exerted powerful influence in his ambition to govern »from the bottom« (Gómez Pomeri 2012: 52f).

Altogether the neoliberal years increased social inequality among the population, widened the gap between the rich and the poor and initiated a debate about the social foundations of democracy. Corruption, quarrels among the liberal-conservative coalition and pacts among the political elite further contributed to the discontent of the population.

In the 2006 elections, opposition leader Daniel Ortega, former president during the Revolution and current head of the Sandinista party, took advantage of the disunity of the political right, the general discontent and mistrust among the population and changes in the electoral law. His electoral victory and the return to power of the Sandinista party FSLN has opened up old divisions within Nicaraguan society. Ortega’s presidency (reconfirmed by his reelection in 2011 and 2016) was marked by ambiguous developments since its start; positively welcomed innovations and improvements regarding social justice and equality stand against severe setbacks concerning democratic governance and the rule of law (Schnipkoweit / Schützhofer 2008: 6). The evaluation of his presidency among the Nicaraguan population and in scholarly discussion reflects this ambiguity. His critics accuse him of deconstructing democratic institutions,
undermining the rule of law, and present his government as personalist cult criticizing the Sandinista return as a re-autocratization (Colborn 2012, Gómez Pomeri 2012, ). On the other side, there are more careful evaluations which do appreciate the social improvements under Ortega. These tend to see the present problems and autocratic tendencies rather as a mere continuance of long-lasting misdevelopments and never completely consolidated democratic structures (Anderson / Dodd 2009, Perla / Cruz-Feliciano 2013, Schützhofer / Schnipkowit 2008). This study joins this perspective analyzing the present regime structures as a peak of a chain of misdevelopments and autocratic features inherent in the Nicaraguan system since the first steps were taken towards democracy with the Revolution of 1979. All Nicaraguan governments since 1990 have been (more or less) democratically elected, they were later accused of exceeding their powers, linking posts and advantages to party membership and repressing oppositional forces.

The analysis of these hybrid regime structures was part of the empirical study and their practical manifestation will be analyzed in the following chapter (5).

4.3 Nicaragua’s political system

Nicaragua is a presidential democracy with a democratic Constitution in force since 1987 and reformed in 1995, 2000, and 2014. The classic three powers executive, legislative, and the judiciary are complemented by the Electoral Council. The President is both head of state and head of government and besides Commander in Chief of the Nicaraguan Army. Regular elections for the President and the 90 delegates of the unicameral National Assembly take place every five years (Schobel / Elsemann 2008: 421ff). The National Assembly elects the 16 judges of the Supreme Court of Justice for a term of five years. The electoral council is elected by the National Assembly and responsible for the organization and pronouncement of elections (GlobalLex 2015).

The country is split into 15 Departments (administration units without legislative and executive institutions), the two autonomous regions Atlántico Norte and Atlántico Sur at the Caribbean Coast, and 153 Municipalities with political, administrative and financial independence
regulated in the law of municipalities\textsuperscript{29} (Schobel / Elsemann 2012: 436). Since the year 2000, municipal elections take place staggered from national elections every four years (Anderson / Dodd 2009: 160).

Nicaragua’s party system is historically polarized and split in two, while the historical cleavage between Conservatives and Liberals has been replaced by a struggle between Sandinistas and liberal-conservative parties since the end of the Sandinista Revolution (Schobel / Elsemann 2012: 427f). On the left of the political spectrum we find the increasingly dominant and presently governing party FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) and the MRS (Movimiento Renovador Sandinista) founded during the 1990s by former FSLN party members who were critical and disappointed with Ortega’s leadership. The conservative spectrum in the past 20 years has been determined by the PLC (Partido Liberal Constitucionalista) of ex-president Arnoldo Alemán and the Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI).

\textbf{4.4 A short history of Nicaraguan civil society}

\textbf{4.4.1 Popular organization in the Revolution}

The formation of civil society in Nicaragua can be traced all the way back to indigenous communities in the 19th century and the development of the first labor unions or mutual savings and assistance organizations at the beginning of the 20th century can be seen as a further step in this process (Serra Vázquez 2011: 24). But because Nicaragua was controlled in a dictatorship for over 40 years, where all kinds of autonomous civic organizations were either suppressed or eradicated, the Sandinista Revolution must be counted as the real birth of modern civil society in Nicaragua.

In the 1970s, civil society emerged as a broad social movement with grassroots organizations from diverse societal strata, united in their popular protest and rebellion against dictator Somoza (Williams 1994: 172f). Particularly in the aftermath of the major earthquake striking the country’s capital Managua in 1972 and the President’s success in diverting money flows from international cooperation into his own pockets, resistance

\textsuperscript{29} Law no. 40 »Ley de Municipios«, 1988.
against the regime grew (ICD 2006: 79f). Next to informal groups and grassroot initiatives, the number of officially registered organizaciones sin fines de lucro (non-profit organizations) rose up to 338 until 1979. New groups emerged, linked to Nicaraguan entrepreneurs, (independent) trade unions, the women’s movement, FSLN guerillas and including even the militant (grassroots) parts of the Christian churches. (ICD 2006: 78ff). The emerging organizations were, moreover, supported by international cooperation that »started to rely more on chanelling its help via social organizations than via the official institutions of a regime considered as highly corrupt« (ICD 2006: 82). Despite their diverse societal backgrounds, these groups found common goals in their struggle for democratization, the defense of human rights violated by the regime, the fight against corruption and in their engagement in the area of humanitarian assistance (ICD 2006: 81f). With their not only non-governmental but primarily »anti-governmental« (ICD 2006: 82) orientation, these groups built the backbone of the Sandinista Revolution succeeding in 1979 (ICD 2006: 82f).

The following »revolutionary decade of the 1980s was characterized by the dominance of the Sandinista mass organizations« (Borchgrevink 2006: 7), all of which were highly active and integrated large parts of the population (Borchgrevink 2006, Martí i Puig / Wright 2010, Polakoff / La Ramée 1997). Prominent examples were the workers’ confederations FETSALUD (union of health workers), ATC (association of farm workers) or ANDEN (teachers’ confederation), the women’s organization AMNLAE and the CDSes (Comités de Defensa Sandinista), which in 1988 turned into the Movimiento Comunal (Borchgrevink 2006: 7ff). These organizations enabled the participation of the people in the solution of problems in the different societal sectors and served to organize and mobilize society in the name of the Revolution. Next to their symbolic power, they helped the revolutionary government to implement concrete policies – serving as a base for successful achievements such as the literacy or vaccination campaigns (Borchgrevink 2006: 18; Serra Vázquez 2007: 40). Nonetheless, these organizations were marked by their vertical management styles and close ties to the Sandinista party, which functioned

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30 In Nicaragua a legal personality status was first granted to a nonprofit organization in 1956 (ICD 2006: 81).
31 Translation by the author
as the primary source of legitimation and funding (Serra 2011: 24). Martí i Puig / Wright describe these »organizaciones de masas« (OM) as a crucial pillar of the Sandinista regime:

»The third pillar of the Sandinista apparatus was its organic links with the OMs, which included trade unions and social organizations made up of neighbors, youth, children, or women. The FSLN always considered that ”the masses“ had to join social organizations that, although not part of the party structure, were nevertheless organically linked to it. These organizations had a very important role in bringing together large groups for revolutionary tasks.« (Martí i Puig 2010: 84).

The top-down structure of these organizations with leaders chosen by the party assured the commitment to the revolutionary government and its project. Furthermore, with growing resistance to the Revolution from internal and external actors (civil war) in the mid-1980s, the CSOs were pushed to become more and more a mouthpiece of the government rather than representing their members’ and constituencies’ proper interests. (Borchgrevink 2006: 18f, Kampwirth 2006: 76f).

This pressure from above together with a general discontent with the war and the disastrous economic situation of the country initiated a slow autonomization process accompanied by a gradual desertion of members and their search for new participation modes from the mid-1980s on (Kampwirth 2006: 77f, Serra Vazquez 2007: 42). An illustrative example of this autonomization can be observed with the fate of the famous women’s organization AMNLAE. Founded during the fight against Somoza in the 1970s. AMNLAE became by far the strongest women’s organization in the 80s, playing a key role in »challenging traditional authority« (Kampwirth 2006: 76) and representing women’s interests in the Revolution. Nevertheless, with the Revolution proceeding their party loyalty began to impede their »ability to challenge gender inequality« (Kampwirth 2006: 76). The organization’s uncritical support of the Sandinista government’s idea of women organization – empowering women to fulfill the work and space left by the men gone to war and their concentration on service provision – led to harsh discussions within the women’s movement. Eventually, these resulted in split-offs of critical groups as a response which did not want to postpone their interests for the supposed superior interests of the Revolution (Obuch 2014).

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32 Asociación de Mujeres Luisa Amada Espinoza
This first height of Nicaraguan civic organization in the form of the Sandinista mass organizations, their ambiguity and its impact on the further development of Nicaraguan CSOs is a central theme in the scholarly discussion of the Revolution (Bischoff-Peters 2004, Borchgrevink 2006, Polakoff / La Ramée 1997, Serra 1991, Walker 1991). Carlos Fernando Chamorro, son of ex-president Violeta Chamorro and current director of the Communication Research Center CINCO, highlighted the Revolution’s crucial role for the evolution of civil society in Nicaragua:

»The Revolution left us a formidable political potential by organizing and unleashing the energies of new political and societal actors. Small farmer unions, community, youth and women’s organizations turned into outstanding actors in shaping national life, raising the flag for the people from below. Some of these organizations remained subjected to the FSLN’s vanguardismo, but those that managed to regain their autonomy or that regrouped under new identities, today belong to our stock of social movements and non-governmental organizations that without turning into an extension of the FSLN, represent an important part of political and social innovation from the sphere of civil society.«

33 (Confidencial No 153, cited from ICD 2006: 85).

The importance of these years for the Nicaraguan society’s awakening and the evolution of interests after decades of suppression and apathy are undeniable. On the other hand, the vertical character of societal organization, the high party influence and lack of autonomy vis-à-vis the Sandinista government seem to mark the nature of at least some parts of Nicaraguan civil society until today (see results of empirical study in chapter 7.).

4.4.2 The boom of NGOs and the institutionalization of civil society

When the Sandinista Government was suddenly voted out in 1990, a challenge was posed to all CSOs and led to a reformation of the civil society sector. The classic Sandinista mass organizations lost their »hegemonic role« (Serra 2007: 45) due to the sudden lack of resources, deprived of their common revolutionary goal and fragmented by internal struggles, and not least a neoliberal government rather hostile to all Sandinista organizations (Borchgrevink 2006: 20).

33 Translation by the author
At the same time, there was a boom of new CSOs pushed by three developments. First, because CSOs easily found new sources of funding from external donors hoping on the bandwagon of the general international boom and worship of NGOs around the UN Rio Summit in 1992 and flourishing support from international donors to non-state actors in Nicaragua. Second, due to the high number of former government employees who after losing their job in the new administration found a new employment field in the CSO sector. Moreover, third, CSOs became necessary as neoliberal policies reduced public service provisions, thus leading to the emergence of organizations in areas such as health and education (Borchgrevink 2006: 8, ICD 2006: 90, Serra 2011: 24f).

As a result in the 1990s Nicaragua became known as »NGO world champion« as measured by the number of NGOs and the number of inhabitants (Kurz 2010: 62). However, the emerging spectrum of CSOs was even broader, including local associations, cooperatives, foundations, sports clubs, churches and the traditional labor unions (ICD 2006: 90). Besides, many started to receive external funding, be it in the framework of multilateral or bilateral development assistance or from foreign non-governmental organizations with close ties to churches or solidarity movements. Their agenda rapidly expanded now embracing diverse issues such as rural development, citizenship, human rights, children’s well-being and education, credits, women’s emancipation, or the environment (Serra Vázquez 2007: 48ff). While under the conservative governments the Catholic Church regained political weight, the Nicaraguan women’s movement evolved as a strong defender of women’s rights and antagonist to misogynic politics (Cuadra Lira / Jiménez Martínez 2010, ICD 2006: 91, Kampwirth 2003). However, Nicaragua still remained a »greatly polarized society« (Borchgrevink 2006: 23), divided between Sandinistas and non-Sandinistas, and up until now many CSO leaders although »actively distancing themselves from the politics and standpoints of the party leadership« retain »a self-identification as Sandinistas in a broader sense« (Borchgrevink 2006: 23f).

Altogether the reshaping of the CSO sector in the 1990s started to play a significant role in the institutionalization of the country’s democratic structures – whether through the elaboration of proposals in almost all important policy fields or raising political awareness and providing information to the general population (Serra Vázquez 2007: 44ff).

Moreover, in a context of massive foreign support, liberalization and the introduction of legal stipulations regulating the role of citizen participation, the CSOs sector and its (political) leverage itself became
increasingly institutionalized (see chapter 4.5 on the legal framework for civic organization).

4.4.3 The new millennium: CSOs under pressure

A next chapter in the development of the civil society sector in Nicaragua has its start in about the year 1997. Repression under the presidency of Arnoldo Alemán and the country’s infestation by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 have set the foundation for the difficult state-civil society relations ever since (Borchgrevink 2006, Kampwirth 2003, Serra Vázquez 2011).

The new President proved hostile towards the CSO sector that he still perceived as predominantly Sandinista and critical towards his conservative-neoliberal government (Borchgrevink 2006: 45f). Working conditions for CSOs worsened as the Alemán administration attempted to expulse donors, close down CSOs and increase state control via law reformations. However, this attempt consistently failed due to the strength and resistance of CSOs and their international donors (Serra Vázquez 2007: 50). Paradoxically, the increased repression under President Alemán rather led to a fortification of civil society and strengthened unification among the CSO sector (Borchgrevink 2006: 27f).

When Hurricane Mitch struck the country in 1998, causing thousands of deaths and destroying large parts of the country, CSOs were able to prove their strength. In the aftermath of the events, it was CSOs that proved most capable of organizing help and assistance for the affected population. An important factor was the ad hoc foundation of the Coordinadora Civil para la Emergencia y la Reconstrucción (CC)\textsuperscript{34}, a network comprising about 300 CSOs. In contrast to the Nicaraguan government which was unwilling and incapable of organizing emergency help and reconstruction and rather stood out for misappropriating large parts of international emergency aid, the CC had a substantial share in the reconstruction process (Serra Vázquez 2011: 25; 2007: 51). Their effort did not only bring them recognition by the population and the international community but as well enhanced the further institutionalization of the legal framework and state-civil society relations (Borchgrevink 2006: 8).

\textsuperscript{34} Civil Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction
However, since then several other incidents and policy decisions have produced tensions between parts of the civil society sector and the respective Nicaraguan governments. The following three received major attention (amongst others) and are particularly interesting as they all involve later President Daniel Ortega (García Palacios / Ullua Morales 2010, Oettler 2010, Serra Vázquez 2011):

In 1998, Zoilamérica Narváez, stepdaughter of Daniel Ortega (then opposition leader) accused him of sexual abuse and was supported by large parts of the women’s movement and other CSOs in her fight for recognition and conviction. Ortega successfully eluded prosecution with reference to his parliamentary immunity and several courts headed by FSLN members dismissed her case forcing her to give in (Oettler 2010: 53). A second point of contention was a set of agreements negotiated around the year 2000 and later known as pact between President Alemán and then oppositional leader Ortega. The by that time leaders of the two strongest political parties agreed on constitutional reforms that exclusively benefited their proper parties. Among progressive forces and many CSOs, however, these were perceived as severe setbacks to the country’s democratic consolidation (Goméz Pomeri 2012: 54f). Another contentious issue has been the prohibition of therapeutic abortion against the tremendous mobilizations and resistance of women’s activists in 2006 (CENIDH 2013: 118). The prohibition raised the political elite’s reputation among conservative forces and built a bridge to ecclesiastical organizations but widened the gap to many others. First and foremost these concerned progressive CSOs that saw it as severe retrocession and since then have denounced its fatal consequences for Nicaraguan women. (Kampwirth 2008: 131, Kampwirth 2011: 22f). Their anger did not exclusively include the conservative government, but as well turned against the FSLN which supported the abolition after a pact with (its former enemy) the Catholic Church in the course of the election campaign (for a summary on the frictions between government and CSOs see García Palacios / Ullua Morales 2010).

The electoral victory and return to power of President Ortega in 2006 can eventually be seen as another critical juncture in the relationship between CSOs and Nicaraguan governments. As outlined in the previous

35 »Therapeutic abortion« allows terminating a pregnancy if the health of the mother is in danger (Booth / Seligson 2012: 234).
section, his presidency has exposed the weaknesses and dependencies of the consolidating hybrid regime structures. Meanwhile, there is a re-strengthening of the political division of the CSO sector, a new wave of repression and instrumentalization and an ongoing withdrawal of international donors. These present difficulties for CSOs under the Ortega presidency have raised much discontent and been subject to documentation and discussion within the sector (see Cuadra Lira / Jiménez Martínez 2010, García Palacios 2009, García Palacios / Ullua Morales 2010, Serra Vázquez 2007, 2011). Nonetheless, as this happens mainly in reports from donor organizations and local CSOs, there is still a lack of systematic reflection and scholarly debate. The particular challenges faced by the CSO sector particularly under the Ortega administration were part of the empirical study in Nicaragua and will be brought out in the main part (chapter 6.).

4.5 The legal framework for civic organization

The Nicaraguan Constitution of 1987 includes the people’s right to participation and establishes the fundamental liberties of expression, participation, and organization (Serra Vázquez 2007: 76). Since then CSOs have eked out a further specification of these rights in concrete laws, including the law on nonprofit organizations (1992), the law on citizen participation (2003) and the law on access to information (2007) next to specific laws for cooperatives and trade unions (Serra Vázquez 2007: 71, 76).

There is a comprehensive designated role of citizen participation on all governmental levels including the possibilities of a citizen initiative to present projects, citizen consultation in the law-making process, and the right to receive information from different kinds of state institutions (García Palacios 2009, Serra Vázquez 2007: 71).

An important step in the practical recognition and appreciation of CSOs was the creation of different bodies of consultation and interaction facilitating the involvement of civil society actors in decision-making.

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36 Reforms in 1995 and 2000
37 Ley sobre Personas Jurídicas sin Fines de Lucro
38 Ley No. 475 Ley de Participación Ciudadana
39 Ley de Acceso a la Información
processes at various government levels. At the national level, the CONPES\textsuperscript{40} was created already by constitutional reform in 1995 and finally implemented in 1999 under the pressure from CSOs (Serra Vázquez 2007: 51, 135). This body brings together representatives of civil society, state institutions, and enterprises to discuss public policies and development plans (Serra Vázquez 2007: 130). At the departmental and municipal level there exist the \textit{Consejos de Desarrollo Departamental} (CDD) and \textit{Comités de Desarrollo Municipal} (CDM) meant to bring together municipal governments and CSOs (Serra Vázquez 2007: 124).

In Nicaragua, labor unions and cooperatives have to register via the Ministry of Labour (MITRAB\textsuperscript{41}), all other types of organizations (usually associations and foundations) are regulated under the law on nonprofit organization in responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior (MINGOB)\textsuperscript{42} (Adahl 2007: 6). These have to solicit their legal status in the National Assembly and are annually validated. The time-consuming procedure contributes to the high degree of informality and fluctuation of the sector where the majority of Nicaraguan CSOs operate without a legal status (Serra Vázquez 2011: 56, 63).

By and large, experts agree that the legal framework in Nicaragua today »is positively inclined towards broad citizens’ participation« (Adahl 2007: 15) with legally consolidated rights and instances of participation that go beyond those of the neighboring countries. However, there is a striking difference between these formal structures and their practical value and implementation. In practice, the political elite’s lacking acknowledgment and will to implement legislation together with the weakness of democratic institutions and the ignorance of the population (regarding their rights) have traditionally limited autonomous citizen participation in Nicaragua (Adahl 2007: 15, Serra Vázquez 2007: 80). As one CSO representative, cited in a survey from 2010, stated, up to now none of the Nicaraguan governments »respected the role of civil society as intermediary between state and public policies« (García Palacios / Ullua Morales 2010: 16).

In this context, particularly since 2007, there has been a gradual debilitation of the consultation structures described above and a creation of new

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} Consejo Nacional de Planificación Económica y Social
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ministerio der Trabajo
\item \textsuperscript{42} Ministerio der Gobernación
\end{itemize}
structures with partisan coloration (Anderson / Dodd 2009, Serra Vázquez 2008). These new participation structures were also part of the empirical study and are dealt with in chapter 6.

4.6 The present Nicaraguan CSO sector

In general, civil society organization and citizen participation in Nicaragua are said to be quite high compared to the neighboring countries – a fact often attributed to the country’s revolutionary past (Serra Vázquez 2011: 31). However, there is still a lack of transparency and statistical data concerning concrete numbers and the size of CSOs as well as regarding their funding by international cooperation. Data provided by the national ministries such as the Ministry of Governance (MINGOB) or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MINREX) is incomplete as it lacks regular updating. Moreover, these databases include only registered CSOs while ignoring the high degree of informal organizations that refuse or fail to register and obtain a legal personality. However, some attempts to assess the Nicaraguan CSO sector have been made, principally by foreign (donor) organizations and the CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation. These bring together surveys and properly conducted studies on Nicaraguan CSOs which were taken into account in this chapter for a first description of the sector (Adahl 2007, Borchgrevink 2009, Cuadr a Lira / Jimenez Martínez 2010, García Palacios / Ullua Morales 2010, ICD 2006, Serra Vázquez 2011, 2007).

According to the last CIVICUS report on Nicaraguan civil society published in 2011 (Serra Vázquez 2011), the present Nicaraguan CSO sector consists of a broad spectrum of CSOs that can be grouped into labor unions, cooperatives, community organizations, interest groups, development organizations (NGOs) and national networks of CSOs (Serra Vázquez 2011: 26f).

As outlined before, the high degree of informality of the Nicaraguan CSO sector can be related to the organizations’ lack of time and resources to obtain a legal status as civic organization; besides, further obstacles appear due to political obstacles resulting from the need to be approved by the National Assembly (for further information see results of the empirical study in chapter 6.1.2.1)
Nicaraguan labor unions had their strongest phase during the 1980s. The ongoing revival of Sandinista unions since 2007 could not compensate their weakening during the 1990s facing the loss of Sandinista government and neoliberal policies. According to present estimations 4.5% of the economically active population is organized in unions (Serra Vázquez 2011: 26). There are 21 major Nicaraguan unions and these tend to be politically affiliated with one out of two political camps. A majority is made up by the traditional Sandinista unions (ANDEN, ATC, CST(JBE), FETSALUD, UNE) subsumed under the National Workers’ Front (UNEFNT). The second, minor group of unions is mostly affiliated with the liberal parties (Borchgrevink 2006: 33, Serra Vázquez 2007: 88).

A further share in the self-organization of particularly the rural parts of the population has an estimated number of 6600 cooperatives with about 500,000 members. These organize the people in the fields of »saving and loans, transport, potable water, agriculture-livestock production, fishing, mining, textiles, handicrafts, tourism and housing construction« (Serra Vázquez 2011: 26). However, the real size and importance of this part of the sector is difficult to measure as most of them do not have »updated legal documentation« (Serra Vázquez 2011: 26).

According to CIVICUS small, informal community organizations exist in all rural and urban communities in Nicaragua, concerned with local issues and often supported by NGOs. These work towards local development in different fields (e.g., potable water, security, electricity, transport, ore construction and infrastructure maintenance). Still, there are no solid estimates as these tend not to be legally registered (Serra Vázquez 2011: 26f).

Fourth, there is a variety of interest groups usually comprising the form of associations or foundations. These organize people with common interests including student associations, sports and social clubs, cultural centers, indigenous and religious groups or social services. In 2010, about 4000 of these were legally registered (Serra Vázquez 2011: 27). However, still understudied are the various religious respectively church-related groups, as these have the highest membership levels of all societal organizations (Serra Vázquez 2011: 28f).

The probably most visible group is that of development organizations, usually referred to as NGOs in Nicaragua (Serra Vázquez 2011: 27). With an estimated number of 600-700 active organizations it is numerically little (Serra Vázquez 2011: 27), but these organizations stand out for their budget, capacity and acting as donors for smaller CSOs (Serra 2007: 96, 2011: 27). NGOs in Nicaragua usually take the form of associations and
foundations, the majority has its seat in Managua but executes projects in the departments (Serra Vázquez 2007: 96). Their perceived dominance in the past has inspired much criticism of the NGOization of the Nicaraguan civil society sector. While NGOs stand for expertise, professionalization, and efficiency they lack representation, are accountable to foreign donors rather than to their beneficiaries and risk to place service delivery before »social-change-oriented advocacy« (Chahim / Prakash 2014: 487) (Borchgrevink 2006: 43).

Last, there are various civil society networks, founded to bring organizations together to share information and coordinate their interests. Among the most prominent examples count the Coordinadora Civil, the Coordinadora Social, and the Nicaraguan Network for Democracy and Local Development (RNDDL) (Serra Vázquez 2011: 27).

Next to its diversity, a further characteristic of the Nicaraguan CSO sector is its historical dependency on international cooperation. Ideational and monetary support from foreign donors has traditionally played a significant role for the majority of organizations. According to a survey carried out by CIVICUS, more than half of the participating CSOs received funds from external cooperation agencies (53%), followed by those who receive membership fees (unions and cooperatives) (23%), individual donations (15%), government funds (14%) up to those stating to gain income out of service fees and the sale of services (10%) (Serra Vázquez 2011: 36). Official multilateral and bilateral cooperation dedicated to CSOs is complemented by private support from smaller associations, partnerships and NGOs often dating back to the strong international solidarity movement during the Revolution. Concrete numbers indicating the share of cooperation flowing to the sector are nearly impossible to assess. All attempts by the Nicaraguan governments to register the flows to the CSO sector have failed so far, while donors themselves admit a lack of transparency, communication, and exchange of information (see results of empirical study in chapter 6.). It is clear, however, that since 2007 traditional donors have reduced their engagement in Nicaragua while emerging donors – predominantly Latin American partners, Russia, and China – entered the arena (Roussel 2013).

By and large, the present Nicaraguan CSO sector so far can be characterized by its diverse landscape of organizations with varying degrees of visibility and informality, a historical linkage to the Sandinista Revolution and continuing dependency on foreign funding.
4.6 The present Nicaraguan CSO sector

Table 5: Mapping of the Nicaraguan CSO sector (CIVICUS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of CSO</th>
<th>Estimated number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labor unions</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperatives</td>
<td>6600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest groups (associations and foundations)</td>
<td>4130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development organizations (NGOs)</td>
<td>600-700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community organizations</td>
<td>No estimations / not registered</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CIVICUS Civil Society Index for Nicaragua (Serra Vázquez 2011: 26f)
5. The context

The first research question (RQ 1) of this thesis concerned the analysis of regime-hybridity as the general context of civic organization in Nicaragua. Tying in with the theoretical considerations on hybrid regimes from the beginning, the focus of analysis was on the qualitative dimension and practical manifestation of hybrid regime structures. This chapter summarizes the findings drawn from a literature review and the interviews conducted with Nicaraguan experts during the first part of the study. Additionally, the chapter takes Nicaragua’s performance in prevalent democratic indices into account.

The results show that hybrid regime structures in Nicaragua manifest in different dimensions. First, we can observe the characteristic co-existence of formal democracy and autocratic legacies in the political-institutional arena. This ambiguity translates into a fragile separation of powers, weak institutions, corruption and clientelism and, not least, in the hyper-presidentialism of current President Daniel Ortega (5.1). Second, there is a history of massive foreign intervention and dependency on international institutions and external donors which stand vis-à-vis stagnating poverty and inequality rates in the socio-economic sphere (5.2). Furthermore, third, regime-hybridity in Nicaragua has a socio-cultural dimension as well; reflected in the ambiguities found concerning the official support of democracy and the anchorage of democratic values among the Nicaraguan population (5.3).

44 There are various indices which measure the quality of democracy and all of them have been controversial concerning their validity and explanatory power (Munck / Verkuilen 2002). Nonetheless, a glance at some of the frequent indices serves well to find out how democracy in Nicaragua is internationally rated compared to other countries and therefore give an overview of possible drawbacks and problems. The consulted sources measure the degree of political rights and civil liberties, the dispersion of corruption, and judicial independence as well as illustrating possible socio-economic obstacles to democratic consolidation.
5.1 The political-institutional dimension

»What characterizes this country? – The return of the past. What we witness today is what we’ve seen, read, and heard several times already. Practically we face a substantial weakness of our institutional culture and our rule of law. This is, perhaps, what characterizes our society most in this difficult process of democratic consolidation.« (Int. 23)

The expert interviews conducted in the first part of the study highlight how Nicaragua shares typical characteristics with other hybrid regimes in the political-institutional sphere. A continuous misuse and illegitimate extension of power through the country’s institutions and powers threaten to undermine the formal democratic structures developed since the Sandinista Revolution. For research pragmatic reasons, the principal focus of this study was on the presidency of Daniel Ortega (2007 - today). However, this chapter argues that this period should not be seen as a sudden rupture and unpredictable democratic backlash. Rather, it appears as a climax in a series of at least partially autocratic governments and a consequence of (historically misguided) developments in Nicaragua.

5.1.1 Daniel Ortega’s hyper-presidentialism

»So here we see that the manipulations of power bring us back to an abnormal situation. A situation of autocracy, of hegemony of the executive power over the other powers, of a personalization of power – which is what we’ve seen in the past, already.« (Int. 23)

President Ortega since his return to power in 2007 has continued the Nicaraguan tradition of being ruled by populist regime structures and powerful individuals who once (democratically) elected tend to be willing to exceed their powers. However, he does so with even more success than his predecessors who faced much stronger opposition in and outside their proper parties (Colburn / Cruz 2012: 104ff). As a former revolutionist and controversial Sandinista leader, he has traditionally divided his country into loyal followers and critics. This breach has gotten even stronger with his

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45 This and all of the following quotations from the interviews with experts and CSO leaders were translated into English by the author (as described in the methods chapter 3, interviews were conducted in Spanish (29) and German (2)).
5. The context

return to power in 2007 and arguments are highly politicized on both sides (int. 6). Still, the interviewed experts coincide in their concerns regarding Ortega’s style of government, referring to the executive’s illegitimate extension of power, the manipulation of elections, and the extension of clientelistic structures.

From the beginning of his presidency President Ortega has successfully managed to extend his power as far as possible over all forces and state institutions (int. 1, int. 6, int. 10). He started by and by with filling positions in the public service with Sandinista party loyalists. As a result, he by now controls large parts of the judiciary and the electoral council, reflected in their unconditional support regarding the President and his policies (int. 3). His power later legitimately extended to the legislature as the governing party FSLN in the 2011 elections received a clear majority of delegates in the National Assembly (62 out of 90 seats). This power shift enables the current government to make constitutional changes and elect its proper followers into important public offices (Gómez Pomeri 2012: 132). An expert summarizes:

»The FSLN’s political project, and you can find this in the documents, read it in the revista correo, in the party’s general literature … you realize that there’s this conception that it’s not only about being in government, it’s all about power control. And power, that’s what they say, is the power over all institutions and divisions of government, power over the territories and the municipalities, and all forms of political power in general.« (Int. 15)

Furthermore, the Ortega administration has also bought television channels, radios, and newspapers to use them as propaganda channels to control public opinion and ensure support for the government party (int. 1). The omnipotent position of Ortega includes his wife Rosario Murillo who »is widely considered to have undue influence in government« (Anderson / Dodd 2009: 158) although she never ran for office. In practice, she is said to attend more meetings than her husband and as head of communication exercises considerable control (int. 11).

Democratic setbacks are stated as well regarding the electoral process. In Nicaragua, there have always been accusations of irregularities, manipulations and a lack of transparency. Again, criticism grew stronger with Ortega and especially the 2008 local elections have become known for the government’s disregard concerning democratic institutions and not least the will of the people – in favor of a retention and strengthening of its proper power (int. 10). Already in the run-up, the government together with the electoral council refused to allow national and international election observers and deprived two parties of their legal status (MRS and PC)
practically discarding them from the elections. The counting of votes ended in a resounding victory of the FSLN throughout the country. However, the aftermath was dominated by various incidences of nontransparent ballot counting, the government’s ignorance of numerous accusations of manipulations and the people’s requests to count their vote (Gómez Pomeri 2012: 123ff, int. 10). Accusations were repeated in the following elections (presidential election of 2011, municipal elections of 2012) although to a lesser extent. Most controversial, however, was the first reelection of President Ortega in 2011. When the President sought for another term of presidency, the government-loyal Supreme Court sentenced a verdict declaring article 247 of the Constitution – prohibiting reelection – as inapplicable (int. 23) and paved the way for another term of presidency (Argueta et al. 2011: 5). Ortega hence joins the tradition of several Latin American presidents who have tried to perpetuate themselves in power by controversial constitutional changes.

In addition to that, while clientelism and corruption have always been part of Nicaraguan political culture, experts bemoan that the system of clientelistic dependency structures has been brought to perfection under the Ortega administration (int. 23, int. 34, Goméz Pomeri 2012: 102f). The government’s social programs are reported to be principally directed to FSLN partisans, public infrastructure and building projects executed in districts with high FSLN membership while posts in public service are preferentially allocated to FSLN members. This system of patronage and clientelism is characterized by its lack of transparency and its inevitable dependency on the presidency of Ortega (Goméz Pomeri 2012: 102ff). An expert particularly highlights the gift-like character of official government programs that link the beneficiaries to the Sandinista party:

»Daniel Ortega’s government project is not to concede rights, but to grant aid. As the topic of reclaiming rights always has its limits, the government solves this by giving away something that is not in the official budget, that is not reliable and for which you have to be grateful. This is an important limit for the people in need. Of course they should help! But I’d prefer they’d help them by restoring their rights!«
(int. 13)

These clientelistic structures tend to be hidden behind a pro-democratic official discourse and window dressing actions. This can be observed for instance regarding gender equality, a field in which official improvements such as the introduction of gender quotas or the promulgation of a long-awaited law against violence are accompanied by increasingly autocratic tendencies or simply undermined by the lack of implementation and political will. For many Nicaraguan women, the access to political posts and
participation is blocked because they do not have party membership while those who do reach such positions seem to lack real power. In practice, these governmental model projects often end up in subtle repression and maintain rather than question clientelism and discrimination (int. 27).

Altogether, the findings point out how the weak institutional context together with President Ortega’s omnipotent power claims favor the erosion of democratic structures in Nicaragua. The blurring boundaries between the three divisions of government, public institutions, and the FSLN party are visible at all institutional levels (int. 10). As a consequence, experts bemoan that all powers in Nicaragua seem to revolve according to the President in the sense of a new »hyper-presidentialism« (int. 3).

5.1.2 Reasons for the President’s popularity

»It’s the meta-narrative, the Revolution. And only the FSLN, headed by Daniel Ortega and with Rosario Murillo at his side, can do it. So this is the meta-narrative, the FSLN is the only force able to do the Revolution (...). Thus, the primary source of loyalty is political loyalty.« (Int. 21)

A central characteristic of Daniel Ortega’s presidency is his apparent popularity and support by large parts of the Nicaraguan population, which also serves as a legitimation for the extension of his power including all breaches of democracy. Four central reasons why Ortega’s autocratic endeavor to extend his power landed on fertile soil in Nicaragua can be drawn from the expert interviews.

The first argument is his personal relation to the Revolution which serves as a legitimation source for his policies. The President has made a habit of claiming responsibility for the Sandinista’s historical merits in the Revolution – and positions himself to be the only one able to continue the Revolution and lead the Nicaraguan people out of poverty and misery. With this discourse, he particularly catches the generation who lived the Revolution and despite all negative developments and disillusions still feels loyal to the FSLN party (int. 21). In the quote above, one expert frames this discourse as a »meta-narrative« (int. 21) that aims at commanding political loyalty of the population.

The second reason for Ortega’s success lies in the weakness of democratic institutions and the lack of a party-political opposition. The country’s weak democratic framework has proven incapable of restricting and resisting to Ortega’s omnipotent power claims (int. 3, int. 23). In other words; with a solid democratic context Ortega would have never been able
5.1 The political-institutional dimension

to overstep legal boundaries and illegitimately extend his power. In fact, the Nicaraguan political elite, the legislature in the form of the National Assembly, as well as the judiciary including judges on all levels have – in the face of promised benefits and popular power – proved corruptive and receptive for Ortega’s attempt to undermine them. Also, from the beginning of his presidency Ortega did not face political opposition from a strong and united party – as the Nicaraguan political landscape is weak (int. 6). The only leftist alternative, MRS, has been deeply weakened by the sudden death of its presidential candidate, Herty Lewites, in 2006 and its exclusion from the 2008 elections (Gómez Pomeri 2012: 43ff). The conservative opposition, on the other hand, does not manage to agree on a common candidate and program, loses itself in internal quarrels and proved unable to stand up to Ortega. As a consequence, today even the strongest critics bemoan the present lack of a political alternative to the governing Sandinista party (int. 13). An expert summarizes:

»We are a deeply polarized society right now. So you cannot find unity neither at the level of civil society nor among political parties, not among the right, not among the opposition. There’s no unified opposition that acts as a counterbalance to the government, society is fragmented and the political parties as well. And the FSLN was intelligent because they did not only manage to turn from opposition party to political power. Moreover, they divided the opposition and they will persist, they will remain in power for several more years, because right now there is no alternative political power able to seize power.« (Int. 6)

The third reason for Ortega’s success is economical. With a series of social programs, Ortega gained the sympathies of the broad population and outrivalled his predecessors whose neoliberal reforms did rather harm than improve the living circumstances of the broad population. Programs such as *Hambrecero* or *Usura Zero* directly address the most vulnerable and poor – and are highly popular among the population. Still, they are controversial due to their clientelistic allocation and party-political misuse (Gómez Pomeri 2012: 97f). As illustrated above, experts criticize these programs for not conceding rights but gifts whose effectiveness and continuance are bound to Ortega’s succession in power (int. 13). Besides, a further economic factor is the President’s control of the public sector.

46 *Zero Hunger*: targets »hunger and food scarcity among the rural poor« (Walker / Wade 2012: 146).

47 *Zero Usury*: »Small, low-interest loans to help women to start small businesses« (Walker / Wade 2012: 146).
5. The context

Ortega government has extended the public service, tried to clean it from its enemies and preferentially employs FSLN partisans since its start. National ministries up to local administrations function as sites for party-political work and the party’s loyal people. In a small country such as Nicaragua with high rates of unemployment and underemployment, this translates into considerable power (int. 21).

The fourth reason for Ortega’s present success and popularity is a demographic one. The majority of the Nicaraguan population ages between 15-25 years. Against this background, experts criticize that Ortega has surrounded himself with inexperienced, young people who are easy to manipulate (int. 21). They bemoan that Ortega is misusing the energy and naivety or lack of political experience of Nicaragua’s youth. These are caught by his revolutionary discourse, attracted by the benefits of the party and feel as if they can achieve everything with this return of the Revolution, although little has changed for real:

»This is a country of chavalos who want to bring about change, who do not have any political experience and in the face of the current discourse they trust that this discourse is true, because it is appealing, with music … we are at a certain point in time where youth, where energy weigh more than reason, than rational, reflective thoughts. So these chavalos have the idea of changing things, but they don’t change anything, nothing at all.« (Int. 21)

5.1.3 Nicaragua’s democratic performance over time

»There is a rupture between two worlds. A real world ruled by the idea of power hegemony, and a formal, legal, institutional, world expressed in the Constitution. To large parts, Nicaragua’s history has been marked by the relation between these two separate worlds. The real world in which power is executed because it’s power, and the formal world of the Constitution – in which we can find a series of principles and declarations that are not respected.« (Int. 23)

The previous sections outlined the curtailing of democratic structures under the Ortega administration and the reasons for the President’s popularity and perspective retention of power. Nonetheless, experts emphasize that Nicaragua has been a deficient democratic state since 1990, with only minor differences under all of the preceding governments. In practice, the democratic institutions developed since the end of authoritarian rule – political parties, the National Assembly, the Supreme Court, municipal and general elections – have so far proved unable to restrict the past and present Nicaraguan presidents’ omnipotent claims to power.
A common saying cited in this context in Nicaragua is that of »país real – país legal« – referring to the differences between constitutional claims and constitutional reality. As summarized by an expert in the quote above, the democratization process in Nicaragua brought the creation of universally accepted institutions. Still, in practice these instruments do not have much strength and validity and the real world is still in large parts dominated by hegemonic power structures (int. 23, int. 3).

Table 6: Nicaragua’s performance in democratic indices over time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Press Freedom Index(^{49})</td>
<td>Score: 53 / 100</td>
<td>Score: 42/100</td>
<td>Score: 52/100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s compilation based on the cited indices.

This stagnation is illustrated as well in the country’s ratings in democratic indices which measure different aspects of democratic performance over time. Table 6 exemplarily illustrates the country’s evaluations by Transparency International, Freedom House and The Economist Intelligence Unit. A comparison of the last twenty years shows only marginal changes under the different governments concerning the perception of corruption, the press freedom, and its general democratic performance.


\(^{50}\) The Economist Intelligence Unit: Democracy Index: Scores range from 0-10; 0-3,9 = Authoritarian regime; 4,0-5,9 = Hybrid regime; 6,0-7,9 = Flawed democracy; 8,0-10 = Full democracy. (http://knoema.de/GDI2015JAN/democracy-index-2014?country=1000960-nicaragua)
For instance, between 1995 and 2015 Nicaragua has always been ranked among the lowest third of countries according to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index. Today, with a rating of only 28 out of 100 possible scores, Nicaragua ranks 133 out of 175 countries. The most well-known example of the clientelistic culture among the political elite and the power of corruption in Nicaragua has been the so-called pact (int. 3, int. 9). Around the year 2000, then President Arnoldo Alemán and Daniel Ortega, at that time leader of the strongest opposition party, negotiated this set of agreements. These have not only been criticized by oppositional forces and minorities to partially favor the parties of the negotiators but are considered to have pushed up clientelism and patronage in Nicaragua. With the pact, the two biggest parties (Liberals and Sandinistas) distributed state institutions among themselves weakening minor parties and closing participation spaces for other actors. Besides, they changed the electoral law enabling Ortega to win the 2006 elections with a minority of 38%. Later, both parties celebrated their pact as a step towards national stability while critics rather see it as an expression of the two caudillos’ claim to power and disrespect of democratic structures. (int. 9, int. 1)

The Press Freedom Index conducted by Freedom House reflects the partiality of the media and ranges from 0 (most free) to 100 (least free). Nicaragua has continuously been given poor marks and today’s score of 52 out of 100 presents an only marginal improvement compared to 53 in 1995. The reasons for this restrictive freedom of the press lie in the power of historical family empires in possession of large parts of the print media and television, intimidation against journalists and the Nicaraguan government’s secretive handling of information (Freedom House 2015).

Finally, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index which is conducted since 2006 has continuously ranked Nicaragua as a hybrid regime with presently only 5,32 out of 10 achievable scores (8-10 = full democracy). The evaluation is based on the country’s performance concerning the electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture.

This stagnation of democratic development in Nicaragua since the 1990s is further confirmed by the general evaluation of the country’s democratic performance. As figure 3 shows, Nicaraguans have faced substantial restrictions concerning their civil liberties and political rights since the institutionalization of democracy after the end of civil war in 1990. In fact, Nicaragua is one of the countries that has been assigned the status of
5.2 The socio-economic dimension

*partly free* by Freedom House for more than 25 years now\(^{51}\), turning it into one of the »more persisting hybrid regimes« (Morlino 2009: 284).

Figure 3: Freedom House ratings for Nicaragua 1990-2015

![Freedom House ratings for Nicaragua 1990-2015](image)

Source: Freedom House (2016); freedom ratings between 1 and 2.5 = *free*; between 3.0 and 5.0 = *partly free*, and between 5.5 and 7.0 = *not free*.

5.2 The socio-economic dimension

»In Nicaragua, we have three, four, five – I don’t handle them – traditional economic groups, families, last names. These have always been the same, they marry each other, they are friends, they know each other, talk – and that’s how problems are solved. And these have always, somehow, dominated our institutional structures.« (Int. 13)

Secondly, Nicaragua’s hybrid regime structures manifest in a socio-economic dimension. On the one hand, the country’s socio-economic history since 1990 is characterized by the impact and support of international institutions and external donors. At the same time, however, the degrees of poverty and inequality did not change significantly – making Nicaragua today look »remarkably unchanged from the 1980s« (Colburn 2012: 92). The chapter sketches this interrelation of massive external dependency and the country’s persisting socio-economic problems. Table 7 concludingly illustrates the weak development since 1990 by comparing socio-economic indices from 1990 until today.

\(^{51}\) With one exception in 1998 (*free*).
5. The context

At the heart of Nicaragua’s tenuous socio-economic situation lies the country’s historical dependency on international development assistance and external donors. Traditionally influential institutions are, amongst others, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank or USAID (GIZ: LI Portal). Their influence was extremely high during the neoliberal era between 1990-2006 marked by adjustment programs, depth payment, and privatization. However, these measures eventually led to an increase in poverty, inequality, and a shrinking literacy rate. The resulting antagonism between the radical reforms pushed through and their poor effect on the living circumstances of the general population has inspired much discontent and criticism (Gómez Pomeri 2012: 82).

The situation changed under President Ortega although not as much as expected viewing his critical attitude towards neoliberal institutions during opposition times and his orchestration as President of the poor. Contrary to previous statements, the country has maintained its membership in CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement) and continued cooperation with the IMF and World Bank (Walker / Wade 2012: 109f). Since 2008, however, many bilateral traditional donors from Europe and North America have withdrawn and at least decreased their funding and support. Official development assistance to Nicaragua diminished from about $840 million in 2007 to $497 million in 2013. The reasons lie in a general shift of interests as well as in the perceived autocratic tendencies and the manipulation of elections in 2008. Instead, Nicaragua is now said to receive up to $600 Million annually in the framework of ALBA\(^\text{52}\) (Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our America) initiated by Venezuela’s former President Hugo Chavez (Walker / Wade 2012: 109f). The controversial support is given »in the form of gifts or concessionary loans, none of which has formally entered the government budget« (Colburn 2012: 98). The lack of transparency and its democratic deficit are often criticized, but at least part of the money is used for the government’s poverty reduction programs.

Despite this massive impact of external donors, however, Nicaragua still ranks as »the poorest country in Central America and second poorest in the Western Hemisphere« (The World Factbook: Nicaragua) with stagnat-
5.2 The socio-economic dimension

...ing high levels of unemployment and poverty. Even the steady economic growth in the last years did not result in improved living circumstances for the broad population, and with a Gross National Income per capita (GNI per capita) of estimated US $1870, Nicaragua still ranks at the lower end in Latin America. More than 40% of all 5.9 million Nicaraguans still live below the poverty line and about 15% of all households live in extreme poverty meaning living on less than US$1.25 per day (The World Fact Book: Nicaragua). Moreover, Nicaraguan society is not only poor but also wealth is highly unequally distributed, reflected in a Gini Index of 40.5 (2010) putting it on rank 59 out of 144 of the most unequal countries worldwide (The World Fact Book: Nicaragua).

Nicaragua is a traditionally agro-industrial country but currently its major growing working sector is services. Jobs are vulnerable depending on changing world market prices, salaries are low and working conditions are tough as in the often cited maquilas. These are textile firms in which principally women are exploited to produce clothes for European and North American consumers (for further information see i.a. Bickham Mendez 2005). While the official unemployment rate is about 7% (2013), a bigger problem is the high degree of informality in the job market, characterized by nearly 50% underemployment. (The World Fact Book: Nicaragua)

A major part of the country’s GDP comes from the money sent back to families by Nicaraguan emigrants, who are mostly in the US or the southern neighbor Costa Rica. Poverty has led to traditionally high emigration rates. According to conservative estimations, about one out of eight Nicaraguans lives abroad – with adverse effects on Nicaraguan family structures. Their remittances made up about $1,140 million in 2014 (and are unofficially expected to be higher) meaning a considerable part of the GDP. (GIZ: LIPortal GIZ)

A look at table 7 confirms the complex socio-economic situation of the country 26 years after the end of the civil war and 37 since the transition from authoritarian rule. Compared over time, Nicaragua shows increasing rates in crucial areas such as GDP growth, GNI per capita, or life expectancy at birth. Still, a look at the consequences in practice reveals that poverty has only marginally diminished, inequality remains high (Gini index), and the literacy rate remains low (78%), comparable with that of Lesotho or Namibia. At the same time, the decreasing unemployment rate only conceals the high rate of underemployment of about 46.5% while the exploding remittances polish the stagnating income rates. Furthermore, the
Human Development Index only increased marginally compared to the country’s devastation after the end of civil war in 1990.

Table 7: Nicaragua’s socio-economic performance over time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>1990/95</th>
<th>2000/5</th>
<th>Today</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People below poverty line</td>
<td>50.3% (1993)</td>
<td>48.3% (2005)</td>
<td>29.6% (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remittances</td>
<td>$320,000,000</td>
<td>$697,500,000</td>
<td>$1,140,200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>1,009,455,476</td>
<td>5,107,329,007</td>
<td>11,805,641,287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Development Index</td>
<td>0.495 (1990)</td>
<td>0.565 (2000)</td>
<td>0.631 (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life expectancy at birth</td>
<td>64 years (1990)</td>
<td>70 years (2000)</td>
<td>75 years (2013)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: World Bank Development Indicators\(^{53}\), United Nations Development Programme\(^{54}\), The World Fact Book\(^{55}\)

Taken together, the data highlights Nicaragua’s socio-economic stagnation over years. As highlighted in the quote above, a small group of traditional economic leaders continues to lead the country. These, majorly families, make up the political and economic elite in Nicaragua and were only slightly extended with the Sandinista Revolution. They negotiate and profit from economic treaties but seem unwilling to reform the country for the sake of the population (int. 13). At the same time, the majority of the population is occupied with making ends meet and likely attracted by populist

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\(^{53}\) http://data.worldbank.org/country/nicaragua


governments. These have traditionally promised irrational improvements or distributed gifts and benefits to keep people satisfied (int. 13).

On the whole, the outlined ambiguities point to a persistence of hybrid regime structures also in the socio-economic sphere. Formal improvements do not automatically reflect the practical reality of the population. Moreover, the data casts a damning light on the national political and economic elite and, not least, the international community. After all, international institutions and foreign powers, via the World Bank, IMF and various bilateral agreements, have co-determined socio-economic development (or stagnation) in Nicaragua for the last 30 years, alike.

5.3 The socio-cultural dimension

»The Mexican author Carlos Fuentes described Latin America, and here in Nicaragua it perfectly fits as analytic criteria, with país real – país legal. In the legal country there is democracy, in the real country there is no democracy. There, we have contacts, friends, families, last names, peasants, landlords, and the colony still in our heads.« (Int. 13)

A third indicator of Nicaragua’s hybrid regime structures can be found in the socio-cultural sphere. More precisely, the interviews highlight the discrepancy between the official support of democracy in opinion surveys and the practical anchorage of democratic values among the general population. This socio-cultural dimension is connected to the country’s legacies of age-long authoritarian rule, occupation and war and the general lack of previous democratic experience (int. 10, int. 12, int. 13).

Similarly to the political-institutional sphere, where formal democratic structures are undermined by autocratic behavior and practices of the political elite, the support of democracy among the general Nicaraguan population is ambivalent. On the one hand, results from the Latin American Public Opinion Project, LAPOP56, show firm support for democracy which 73.8% of all Nicaraguans believe to be the best form of government. This outcome is only slightly lower than those in the US (76.4%) or Latin America’s »model democracy« Costa Rica (75.1%) (Booth / Seligson 2013: xxx, 151). Besides, LAPOP shows that Nicaraguans stand out for a comparatively high degree of tolerance as they tend to hold non-

56 LAPOP is an academic institution housed by Vanderbilt University, carrying out surveys of public opinion in the Americas since the 1970s.
5. The context

discriminatory attitudes towards women, colored and disabled people (only tolerance towards homosexuals is less) (Booth / Seligson 2013: xxix). Booth / Seligson in their evaluation of LAPOP conclude that »in their attitudes, Nicaraguans are among the least likely citizens in the Americas to express racial or class bias« (Booth / Seligson 2013: 44). Last, a quite stable participation in elections with an average of about 75% in national elections since 1990 even exceeds that of more established democracies (IDEA: Voter turnout data for Nicaragua).

Table 8: Participation in presidential elections in Nicaragua over time

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VAP Turnout</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IDEA: Voter turnout data for Nicaragua

On the other hand, this first impression is deceptive or at least questionable as a more thorough look at Nicaraguan society reveals a discrepancy between the ostensible formal support of democracy and societal practice. For example, Booth / Seligson admit in their evaluation of the LAPOP surveys that the high levels of support of democracy are closely linked to the performance of current President Ortega and the high appraisal of his presidency by his partisans. Accordingly, satisfaction highly depends on party-political affiliation and trust in institutions, and participation in elections and overall ratings of the system diverge enormously among Sandinista voters and those of other political parties (Booth / Seligson 2013: xxxiv).

The survey results also clash with the evaluations of the interviewed Nicaraguan experts. These denounce the persistence of a political culture characterized by the legacies from colonial times and the country’s authoritarian past; amongst others these are the power of populism, the historically high degrees of polarization and politicization within society (int. 12), and the discrimination of women (int. 27). More precisely, experts describe Nicaragua’s political culture as marked by clientelist structures and colonial thinking – reflected in the persisting traditional caudillismo, referring to the continuing power and legitimacy of non-elected charis-

57 VAP turnout: «percentage of the voting age population that actually voted» (IDEA: Voter turnout data for Nicaragua)
matic leaders in society (int. 13). The expert’s quote above illustrates how the thinking and acting of the population is still dominated by colonial times. According to her mind, intersocietal relations resemble those between landlords, foremen, and peasants and favoritism, nepotism and clientelistic structures still rule the political sphere as well as in society (int. 10). This is further specified in the following quote highlighting the speciousness of democracy and the actually prevailing thinking:

»I don’t understand democracy as the fact of free and regular elections, but neither as organized political pluralism to achieve power. I understand it in a much broader way and from this perspective, Nicaragua does not know democracy. It’s a society that mentally lives, a majority of the population, still in colonial times. And colonialism was not a democratic model. Thus, the ambiance seems modern because there is technology, there are highways, traffic lights, mobile phones – but this does not hide the cultural problem. Democracy is a culture, a way of living in the world, and this still lies way ahead in Nicaragua.« (Int. 13)

Moreover, experts observe a historical aspiration for a leader who takes control and responsibility among the population. This is mixed with a propensity to follow social dynamics and populism that dates back to the times of the Somoza dictatorship – and finds its expression in massive popular mobilizations and uncritical worship of presidents (int. 3, int. 12). Another aspect of the political culture in Nicaragua is the persisting discrimination and subordination of women which prevents large parts of the population from participating and fighting for their rights. Women tend to be bound to their households and child-rearing and, if at all, social engagement and face difficulties when trying to get politically engaged (int. 24, int. 27, int. 31). Hybrid structures seem to reproduce the gender roles in Nicaragua, as improvements in official participation and quotas stand against a practical persistence of subordination (int. 24). A further feature results out of the country’s recent history, namely a persisting strength of family-bound division of society into Sandinistas and non-Sandinistas. In Nicaragua, the high politicization and familiar bindings pave the way for the young people’s attitudes and obstructs free thinking while many people fear a repetition of the country’s history of war and struggle (int. 2).

On the whole, the findings point out the ambivalent appreciation and internalization of democratic values and a democratic political culture among the Nicaraguan population that reflect the socio-cultural dimension of hybrid regime structures.
5. The context

5.4 Summary

The chapter analyzed the practical manifestation of hybrid regime structures in Nicaragua, defined by existing ambiguities between formal achievements and their deficient practical implementation or value over time. The findings drawn from the background study show that in Nicaragua, regime-hybridity manifests not only at the most ostensible political-institutional level, but holds a socio-economic and a socio-cultural dimension as well. While at first glance official data point out the formal, democratic achievements, economic growth and a resounding support for democracy among the population, the *país real* is marked by omnipotent governments, stagnating levels of poverty, inequality, and dependency, and the persistence of the colonial heritage of populism, paternalism, and subordination in society.

The next chapter presents the findings on how these outlined structures affect and challenge the Nicaraguan CSO sector.
6. The challenges

The second research question (RQ 2) of this thesis concerned the challenges arising for the Nicaraguan CSO sector out of the present context. The interviews conducted with a broad range of experts of Nicaraguan civil society (background study) allowed for multifaceted insights into the problems and difficulties faced by CSOs in Nicaragua. The findings were analytically divided and correlated to the three different dimensions of hybrid regime structures outlined in the previous chapter.

The first type of challenges diagnosed by the experts refers to those obstacles and pressures arising from the duality of an omnipotent executive and the weakness of democratic institutions. The resulting conflictive relationship between CSOs and the Nicaraguan governments is outlined under the heading political-institutional challenges (6.1). The second type of challenges results from the widespread poverty among the Nicaraguan population and the sector’s dependency on external donors. These findings will be summarized as socio-economic challenges (6.2). The third type of challenges faced by Nicaraguan CSOs has its origin in the country’s historical-cultural legacies. More precisely, it comprises the difficulties arising out of the lack of a democratic tradition and the missing anchorage of a democratic political culture. These concern the broad population as a target and recruitment group as well as the internal organization of CSOs and will be summarized under the heading socio-cultural challenges (6.3).

6.1 Political-institutional challenges; the sector and the state

»With the return to power of this government, one of its objectives has been to destroy any type of autonomous organization that is not subordinated to the government. Thus, if there is a youth, feminist, labor organization, they always try to win them, co-opt them, divide them, buy them – so that in the end there’s this mode of total control where everything is organized from the top to the floor.«
(Int. 13)

The first set of challenges refers to those connected to the conflictive relationship between the CSO sector and the Nicaraguan governments. This chapter starts with outlining the current president’s ambivalent attitude towards the idea of civil society and his resultant endeavor to control the sector (6.1.1). It then proceeds with illustrating the strategies the govern-
6. The challenges

The challenges apply in order to do so, referring as well to the weak democratic institutions that fail to protect CSOs (6.1.2).

6.1.1 The Nicaraguan government’s conception of civil society

»The term civil society is demonized by the government. It’s an invention, they say, of the political right. They link it to imperialist agents in Nicaragua that do imperialist work and receive money from imperialist powers, this is civil society. They don’t use the term.« (Int. 15)

A central source of conflict for CSOs has traditionally been the dismissive attitude of Nicaraguan governments towards the idea of civil society. As highlighted in the short introduction to the case in chapter 4, all governments since the end of the Somoza dynasty have been skeptical towards autonomous non-governmental organizations which they tend to perceive as a threat to their power and assertiveness. However, given the growing omnipotence of the presently governing Sandinista party, the situation for CSOs has got even more complex since 2007 (int. 4, int. 7).

Their shared history marks the relation between CSOs and the current Nicaraguan government including the expectations of both sides; starting with the emergence of civil society favored by the Sandinista Revolution in the 1980s over many Sandinistas’ participation and influence in the boom of the sector in the 1990s to their gradual autonomization from their party roots. Hence, when returning to power in 2007, President Ortega expected strict loyalty from CSOs and support for his policies and his idea to revive the Sandinista Revolution (int. 7). However, there were huge reservations among the sector to Ortega’s return to power and many CSOs were not willing to give up their autonomy and subordinate to the party as the majority of them had done during the 1980s. Consequently, these unfulfilled expectations have given rise to a problematic relation between the government and CSOs (int. 7, int. 16). Against this background, CSOs even more than rival political parties or any other actors have been in the focus of the government’s attention and a point of departure for many confrontations (int. 7). An expert summarizes:

»The FSLN’s return to government involved challenges for civil society concerning the relations with the government, or let’s say a reassessment of the concepts, theoretical and political assumptions on the relations between civil society and the state. Because on the one side a party comes to government that wants to dispute the roles of civil society. (…). And somehow you can read between the lines what the government expected of the CSOs that emerged from Sandinismo. They expected that these groups would submit themselves to the party and the govern-
The Ortega administration’s attitude towards civil society is highly ambivalent. It presents itself as a government of the people and keen to foster citizen participation and mobilization, but rather in the sense of loyal, supportive mass organizations. Experts criticize that it tends to expect unconditional loyalty by third actors and denies their autonomy while stipulating support of its policies. In the administration’s eyes, civic organizations should be either close to the governing party or restrict to service provision and social work but refrain from interfering in public policies (int. 7, int. 32). Hence, they struggle with the idea of CSOs as critical, sometimes oppositional, and independent actors that may try to challenge, question and control the government and its policies. As one expert summarizes, the Sandinista government perceives critical CSOs as actors who compete with the governing party «for money, discourse, and people» (int. 21). He refers to the facts that, first of all, CSOs compete with the government for money flows to Nicaragua in the framework of international development assistance. That second, these can hold a mirror up to the government and criticize its policies due to their expertise. Moreover, third, that CSOs with their work help people to become independent of the government’s benefits and with that less susceptible to co-optation, bribe and unconditional support (int. 21).

At the same time, however, the Nicaraguan government also promotes and particularly needs civic organization; be it for the provision of goods or health services and the execution of social programs, to promote its idea of popular organization and a return of the Revolution and, not least, for its international reputation. Against this background, the Ortega administration has made a habit of differentiating between good and bad, or bourgeois and popular civil society and tries to repress the former while supporting the latter (int. 7). The bourgeois CSOs are associated with the political right and equated with NGOs which to the government’s mind are directed by foreign, imperialist powers and rather squander money than contribute to the prosperity and development of the country. The idea of civil society is perceived as a misused concept, exploited by neoliberal or post-colonialist forces willing to neo-colonize the country (int. 9, int. 18). An expert describes the government’s concept of civil society:

»I think that they try to place these terms in the collective imagery. What happens as a result? — When you speak of civil society, some parts of society will immediately link that to being in opposition to the government. Why? — Because they do not speak like that, they say these people of civil society are paid by the
6. The challenges

US, paid by these capitalist countries; they have huge amounts of money, to become rich, to do whatever they want. But the people are organized in unions, the revolutionary people, the revolutionary, organized citizenry.« (Int. 21)

This perception is closely linked to Nicaragua’s history of occupation and interference by foreign powers that in the past have tried to disempower national governments. In this context, the massive promotion of civil society by international donors since the 1990s has been rekindling old fears.

Against this background, the Nicaraguan government has tried to stop, neutralize, and weaken dissenting CSOs since its beginnings (int. 21). It attempted to prevent them from reaching the population and particularly from taking to the streets which it considers as its exclusive realm that it cannot allow being taken by other organisms (int. 9, int. 21). With that it has (at least in some parts of society) successfully implemented the idea of civil society as an oppositional force to the revolutionary government, consisting of foreign manipulated actors that seek personal enrichment (int. 21).

The alternative concept suggested by the present government is that of so-called »popular« or »social« organizations. Experts criticize that since its return to power, the Sandinista party tries to revive its revolutionary model of the 1980s, i.e. one party with subordinated, coordinated societal organizations that »orbit around it« (int. 21). These organizations fulfill the role of transmission belts, they help the party to organize the masses and are meant to symbolize the idea of direct democracy. They may be present in every segment of society – unions, kids, workers, mothers, teachers, or civil servants – but have to subordinate their agenda to the party’s interests and the bigger idea of the Revolution (int. 7). To oppose them to the biased concept of civil society, the Ortega administration uses other terms such as »pueblo«, »poder popular« or »social organizations« (int. 21).

»They divide civil society; we are part of the oligarchy, they are part of the sociedad civil popular. It’s a subgroup. But it’s a civil society under the Leninist logic, you know, the logic of transmission belts with which you fill the places and construct the people’s power, direct democracy etc.. Hence, the FSLN’s mentality is about creating in every segment of society a certain type of organizations that obeys to the orders of the center, the cupula. The heroic mothers and martyrs, the street kids, the youth, the women, the workers etc. But they have a serious problem and it’s that these people, they stand for specific segments of society, but at the same time they are not in the focus, they don’t have autonomy, no own agenda.« (int. 7)

Figure 4 illustrates the ambivalent conception and discourse of the Ortega administration towards the Nicaraguan CSO sector.
6.1 Political-institutional challenges; the sector and the state

Figure 4: The Nicaraguan government's conception of civil society

Source: Author

6.1.2 The government’s strategies towards CSOs

The Ortega administration’s ambivalent conception of civil society results in a threefold strategy applied with the aim to control and monitor the CSO sector. It includes the repression of dissenting CSOs, the promotion of loyal CSOs and the attempt to monitor the population and its support for CSOs. The three strategies will be described in the following sections.

6.1.2.1 Strategy 1; repression of dissenting CSOs

»So to say we cannot keep on working like this, exist like that forever. Something has to change, if it doesn’t, we won’t be able to survive, and that’s the government’s bet, I guess. Restrict spaces and resources to the point where we have to give in, stop to exist as civil society.« (Int. 4)

According to the interviewed experts, a first strategy of the Nicaraguan government towards the CSO sector is that of repression. It is primarily directed against the most dissenting, critical and prominent CSOs and those engaged in specific, controversial working fields. Repression started with harsh, direct persecution right after the government took over power in 2007/8 and concerned those organizations most visible and most critical of the government’s policies (6.1.2.1.1). Later, there has been attenuation towards rather administrative harassment, more precisely the attempt to restrict CSOs via bureaucratic requirements,
untenable deadlines or arbitrary controls (6.1.2.1.2). These measures are intensified by the general attempt to minimize CSOs’ influence and scope of action by denying them access and information to public institutions and documents (6.1.2.1.3). Last, repression takes place via the restriction and control of international cooperation as an important funding source for Nicaraguan CSOs (6.1.2.1.4).

6.1.2.1.1 Persecution

»But these are not generalized actions, these are instructive, targeted actions against someone so that everybody takes notice. The mechanism is quite sophisticated. When they attacked the first CSO, they didn’t take some random CSO, they attacked CINCO, of Carlos Fernando Chamorro, the son of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the son of Doña Violeta, the revolutionary oligarch par excellence – do you understand? In Matagalpa, they selected the Grupo Venancia, the most belligerent women’s organization. They picked them and the message was clear for everyone. They picked Oxfam and all the organizations immediately got the message – they withdrew from citizen participation, from political incidence, they reoriented their work. So what we observe is that it’s a thoughtful work, they don’t need, for a small society like ours, perform great repressive measures, they just hit the mark.« (Int. 21)

The first means the Nicaraguan government applies to repress dissenting CSOs is that of persecution, referring to direct physical and verbal attacks against dissenting organizations, their leaders and members. Since the government entered office it has made clear that it does not refrain from coming down hard on CSOs capable and willing to criticize and question its policies. As stated in the quote above, the actions tend to be targeted particularly at the most visible, strong, and dissenting organizations (int. 4, int. 7, int. 21). These include those working in controversial fields such as human rights, good governance or transparency and those trying to gain political incidence or stand out for their activism and advocacy – for example many feminist women’s organizations which have developed into a thorn in the government’s side (int. 1, int. 7).

Right at the beginning of the Ortega presidency, harsh accusations and actions were directed against the country’s most popular and famous CSOs. These included the Communication Research Center CINCO58, the CC59,

58 Centro de Investigación de la Comunicación
59 Coordinadora Civil

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by that time the most influential CSO network, the popular Autonomous Women’s Movement MAM\textsuperscript{60}, and the international NGO Oxfam. The Ortega administration accused these CSOs of money laundering and triangulation, lanced house searches and confiscated computers while underlining these actions by public accusations and defamations (Prado 2010, 2011). The government built its accusations on the fact that some Nicaraguan CSOs, as they do not have a legal personality, receive funding via third organizations. However, according to the Constitution, the funding by third organizations is not prohibited and a legal personality is no requirement for organizing for a certain objective. Therefore, experts impute the government of using inadequate if not criminal terms for totally legal activities to associate dissenting CSOs with organized criminality (int. 5, int. 10). As the accusations proved untenable and under the pressure from national and international (donor) protests, the government finally had to give in and stop persecution (int. 16). However, although the cases date back to the years 2007/8, they attracted much attention and taught a lesson at the whole CSO sector. The government demonstrated that to restrict and incapacitate dissenting CSOs, it is willing to act on the edge of legality (int. 4, int. 7).

Apart from these public accusations and defamations against the most prominent CSOs, other types of persecution are more subtle. Nicaraguan organizations report about threatening phone calls, hidden surveillances of their offices and private houses as well as direct physical aggression against individual members during manifestations (int. 2, int. 1). Others complain about daunting messages and a repeated theft of computers, particularly in times when they were working on studies the government did not want to be published (int. 4). An expert claims:

»When a CSO works in terms of advocacy in topics contrary to the government, it’s a sin. Whatever type of organizations that are not in line or show some actions against the government, this is the point where you get persecuted even up to eliminated as CSO. And, even more, at some moment there have been threats to imprison people. Hence, to do advocacy against the government’s policies – it’s a sin.« (Int. 1)

By and by, however, these direct persecutions, frequent at the beginning of the presidency, diminished. They were replaced instead by rather administrative measures that will be described in the next section.

\textsuperscript{60} Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres
6.1.2.1.2 Administrative harassment

»They realized that it was better to let them work than to repress them. (…) I think they saw that it was just easier to let us starve than to repress us.« (Int. 4)

A second means of the government towards dissenting CSOs is that of administrative harassment. After direct repression at the beginning of the presidential term in 2007/8, which served to browbeat CSOs and define the government’s position, repression changed to rather administrative measures (int. 4). As stated in the quote above, the government in the face of protest from CSOs and their international donors soon realized that it was easier and less conflictive to let CSOs »starve« (int. 4) than to intervene directly.

The starting point for the government to control and repress dissenting CSOs is their legal personality, be it by deferring the process of concession or by withdrawing their legal status as a nonprofit organization. As outlined in chapter 4, the Nicaraguan CSO sector is marked by informality and only a small number of organizations dispose of a legal status as association of foundation. However, many bigger organizations choose to become formally registered as this is necessary to obtain direct funding from international donors. This concession process leaves spaces for manipulation as a legal personality has to be conceded by the National Assembly and afterward undergo a bureaucratic procedure to be registered in the MINGOB. In practice, this means that applying for a legal status requires friends (in the parliament), time and money and may demonstrably even take up to six years. At the same time, the Ortega administration has also proved eager to deprive CSOs of their status in case of minor lapses or even based on false accusations (int. 4, int. 28).

The next element of administrative harassment, closely linked to the former, consists of applying double standards and arbitrary requirements when it comes to the administration and work of dissenting CSOs. In a country with a high degree of informal work, a general lack of institutional control, and a weak and slow bureaucracy, the Ortega administration strictly supervises dissenting CSOs and pursues them for minor faults. Examples include arbitrary inspections, fines or sudden and close set deadlines for the submission of reports (int. 28, int. 24). At the same time, the administration itself tends to defer administrative processes like the issuing of certificates, the concession of a legal status as CSO or permissions necessary to start work in different municipalities (int. 2, int. 1). Other examples of administrative harassment include the retention of donations from abroad (e.g. surgical instruments for medicines) or surtaxing them so
that the receiving CSO cannot afford it (int. 21). Experts classify most of these measures as consistent with the Nicaraguan Constitution. Nonetheless, they criticize that in the given context the purpose behind it does not seem to be legality but to intimidate and restrict civic organizations and their work (int. 24) by applying double standards: »So it’s a case of applying double standards. They do not comply, they do not deliver, but they oblige the CSOs to comply. That’s their strategy.« (Int. 21)

Furthermore, another delicate issue is the government’s attempt to impede not only the organizations but as well the private life of their members and particularly their most prominent representatives. Here, the government makes use of its influence on public institutions as well as on the private sector. Administrative harassment to CSO members may happen in the form of tax controls, difficulties to open bank accounts, visa restrictions for foreigners (family members) or deferments in the issuing of documents (int. 2).

Altogether the administrative way of repressing CSOs consists of impeding and restricting their daily work and the lives of their members. The Ortega administration forces organizations and individuals to accuracy and caution in a context marked by informality – while the government itself tends to act on the edge of legality. The situation for CSOs and their members becomes particularly precarious given the weak institutional environment and partisan coloration of institutions that rather support the President than protect critical CSOs.

6.1.2.1.3 Denying access and information

»CSOs don’t have much influence because this government is clear about what it wants, for better or for worse. And not everybody fits into this concept, only those that are in line. Thus, independent, autonomous organizations do not have opportunities for dialogue, they are marginalized and excluded.« (Int. 18)

Next to direct persecution and administrative harassment against the most dissenting and visible, Nicaraguan CSOs suffer from the denial and restriction of information and access necessary for their daily work. Experts claim that CSOs independent from the party do not fit into the government’s concept of hegemony that envisages a direct connection between the government and the broad population. As a consequence, it tries to invisibilize civil society and its achievements (int. 1, int. 4). In other words, the current government tries to deprive civil society of its role as an intermediary between the state and the population that it legally pos-
6. The challenges

cesses. Given the increasing dominance of the Sandinista party, dissenting CSOs in Nicaragua lose the power and influence they, at least to a certain degree, possessed in the past (int. 4). Noticeable in this context is the divergence between the legally designated participation and governmental practice. CSOs in Nicaragua are neither able to make full use of the existing laws on citizen participation or access to information nor of the constitutionally founded local participation structures (int. 4).

The first element of this attempt to exclude and invisibilize dissenting CSOs is the disempowerment of previously existing instances of communication and interaction between the governmental sphere and CSOs. The government made its position clear when it started to dismantle the Consejos de Desarrollo Departamental (CDD) and Comités de Desarrollo Municipal (CDM) at the departmental and municipal level right after its return to power. Although these instances have never been formally abolished, de facto they lost their influence and were substituted by party political structures, the newly founded Citizen’s Power Councils (CPCs) (int. 14). At the same time, the government as well pulled down the CONPES at the national level – starting with the suspension of its last director, Violeta Granera, and her replacement with President Ortega’s wife, Rosario Murillo (int. 11).

Besides, experts claim that the government is boycotting any possibilities for CSOs to gain access and information. The Ortega administration not only stands out for the lack of transparency and available information on its policies (apart from party propaganda published in party loyal media and platforms). In fact, despite existing constitutionally chartered rights, in practice CSOs have no guarantee of access to government institutions, documents or party officials (int. 4, int. 1): »So when you knock on the doors they just close them to you. Although we have a law on the access of information, you always face closed doors, whenever you try.« (Int. 1)

Experts claim that the government practically only listens to those it accepts as partners and tries to invisibilize all dissenting voices and actors (int. 4). However, pressure and working circumstances for CSOs seem to vary, not only depending on an organization’s relationship with the current government, but according to its agenda and working fields, different municipalities and its closeness to the capital Managua.

»Well it’s always easier the closer you are to the field or region where the things happen; it’s easier to come to a solution. But trying to change public policies or the implementation of policies at the national level, you’ll face many obstacles. There’s a lot of resistance of the state to share, to coordinate with somebody that is not part of the party. So many difficulties arise here.« (Int. 27)
Most obstacles and problems seem to arise for CSOs at the national level where the President feels most attacked in his power (int. 12, int. 23), and besides in more conflictive and politicized working fields such as human rights, transparency or good governance – where influence is understood as interference into state policies (int. 2, int. 27). While most pressure and barriers to access and cooperation with CSOs appear in the capital, the government tries to complicate work and influence the local level, too. Experts report that the central government gives orders to the municipalities and mayors not to cooperate with CSOs. Furthermore, it is closing down all platforms of interaction and communication with CSOs through its influence of party members in the city halls, local communities and CPCs. However, it is easier to come through and be heard here than at the central level, as you can still find mayors who tolerate CSOs and cooperate notwithstanding their party membership (int. 5, int. 12). In addition to that, access and tolerance of CSOs are easier with less conflictive and less politicized topics and working fields. Social issues such as health, education or child and youth welfare are less likely to be seen as illicit interference on political issues and undesirable questioning of the government (int. 32, int. 27, int. 9).

Altogether, experts criticize that the government with its dismissive attitude ignores the expertise and capabilities available in the CSO sector. This disregard of existing potentials and actors is particularly problematic in a country that lacks professionals and knowledge to implement policies in many areas due to its poverty. It is particularly disadvantageous as many Nicaraguan CSOs dispose of many years of experience in the field, professional staff, and expertise from international networks. (int. 32, int. 1)

6.1.2.1.4 Monitoring and restricting international cooperation

»So here’s the other mechanism, that is, on the one side, I hit you, but on the other, I hit those that finance you.« (Int. 21)

Another effective strategy of the Nicaraguan government to take action against dissenting CSOs is via the control, influence and restriction of international cooperation as the most important funding source of the sector.

Right in 2007, the government expressed its discontent with the lack of transparency and control of money flows to Nicaraguan CSOs by foreign donors, be it from official development assistance or private initiatives. In an attempt to gain control, it started a first attempt labeled ventanilla unica
and meant to establish a control mechanism to monitor foreign funding to the country. These official bilateral and multilateral or even private money flows are relatively nontransparent and present a considerable sum particularly compared to the Nicaraguan national budget. However, the approach was widely perceived as an unjustified interference and failed in 2009 due to the strong resistance of CSOs and international donors and Ortega’s lack of a majority in the Parliament at that time. (int. 2, int. 3, int. 13)

The government since then has passed on to exert indirect control via the ministry of foreign affairs (MINREX), making use of its structural power over donor organizations and their staff (via work permits, visa issues, etc.). The principal aim seems to be to reduce or stop money flows to the most critical organizations. In this context, experts bemoan the existence of informal black lists of dissenting CSOs which must not receive money (int. 18, int. 11). In such cases, the Ortega administration does not hesitate to put direct pressure on foreign governments to stop their support of certain organizations in Nicaragua (int. 14). Similarly, it tries to prevent funding for certain conflictive topics and working fields it considers as illicit interference into public policies – particularly concerning transparency, good governance, human rights or citizen participation. An expert highlights how donors have to adapt to these pressures:

»We realized that in issues of sustainability, health there was no inconvenience in working with the government. The problems arise when you work in advocacy and try to influence public policies, in citizen participation. Hence they prohibited all international agencies to try to influence public policies, because they say it’s a topic of the Nicaraguan citizens, so they are not allowed to interfere in national politics. Of course, now these don’t talk about public policies anymore, they talk about participation, they use other concepts, right. They changed the terminology.« (Int. 9)

Moreover, at the same time, the Ortega administration tries to divert money for proper governmental programs as it exerts pressure on donors to give part of their funding to government-loyal organizations, projects or even state institutions (int. 21).

According to the experts, the reasons why the Nicaraguan government is apparently so successful in its manipulation of donors and foreign funding flows are threefold. First, the government has opened up new, alternative resources from its membership in ALBA and cooperation with Venezuela and hence is able to compensate the loss or withdrawal of traditional bilateral and multilateral development assistance from European and North American donors (int. 9). Second, it draws again particular power out of its historical and ideological linkage to the Sandinista Revolution. Its posi-
tioning as a revolutionary, leftist government of the people makes it much more difficult for many donors to attack and take position against it – as at least some of them tend to share a historical identification with the Sandinista project (int. 21). Third, the government successfully pressures international donors drawing on their historical connection and tradition in Nicaragua which they fear to lose. After all, many organizations are bound to the country – whether through historical partnerships with local partner organizations or their staff’s private bonds – and reluctant to leave. Hence, they fail to protest against the exertion of influence on their work and the biased selection of project partners in fear of losing their permission to work and stay in Nicaragua (int. 21).

In the end, experts criticize that the Ortega administration’s measures in turn lead foreign donors to adapt their work and pass these restrictions and requirements on to their partner CSOs. This results in a concentration on rather uncontroversial working fields such as health or environmental issues as well as in an adjustment of the selection criteria for partner CSOs and their programs to avoid any interference by the Ortega administration (int. 18, int. 9). And, not least, in a direct cooperation with governmental institutions, including the spending of part of their resources on predetermined projects and organizations to not lose permission to work in the country at all (int. 32).

Altogether, due to their cautious and reticent attitude, international donors have been criticized from various sides of reproducing if not even enforcing government repression and power over the Nicaraguan CSO sector.

6.1.2.2 Strategy 2; building up a loyal CSO sector

»It’s the model of the 1980s that the government is reviving right now. They have their Sandinista teachers, Sandinista unionists, Sandinista children, Sandinista youth, Sandinista workers, Sandinista public servants, Sandinista churchmen, Sandinista garbage men (...).« (Int. 21)

Next to the repression of dissenting CSOs, the second strategy of the Nicaraguan government in order to control the Nicaraguan CSO sector is to build up and support proper, party-loyal CSOs. These organizations compete with dissenting CSOs for spaces and resources, they are used to implement the government’s social programs, and they serve as a local control mechanism to the population. Besides, they stand out as fierce and loyal supporters of the President.
The concrete measures taken by the government in this context will be further elaborated in the following sections. The first one is the attempt to co-opt former Sandinista CSOs and their leaders by aligning them to the party and gaining their loyalty – through pressure as well as via the promise of compensation and power (6.1.2.2.1). The second means is to promote the emergence of new (counter) organizations that enter into competition with the existing dissenting ones and take to the streets in order to manifest their support for the President and his policies (6.1.2.2.2). Finally, the third is to substitute the former official bodies of participation and interaction between government and civil society for proper party-loyal structures (6.1.2.2.3).

6.1.2.2.1 Co-optation

»In the beginning, many Sandinista organizations were united with the non-Sandinista organizations. They were united in their criticism towards the government, in their attempt to influence public policies, that’s to say many who are government officials today once were part of civil society. Members of civil society that projected a role of civil society which today they do not support anymore. Today, they rather say that civil society should be subordinated to the government, to the government’s human development plan.« (Int. 9)

The Nicaraguan government’s first means to build up a proper, loyal civil society sector is to try to co-opt CSOs and their leaders. Since his return to power, President Ortega has successfully attempted to win the favor of formerly more or less independent, particularly traditional Sandinista CSOs and individuals by resorting to materialistic incentives, ideological appeals, and not least to pressure.

Typical examples for traditional Sandinista and after 2007 rapidly re-coopted CSOs are the historical women’s organization AMNLAE, the traditional Sandinista unions such as ANDEN, FETSALUD or FNT, the grassroots movement MCN or the NGO CIPRES. Practically, these have reintegrated themselves into party structures with reference to their shared revolutionary roots and under the promise of influence and support. In other words, they can hope to gain posts for their members in the Ortega administration, to be invited and involved in party events and to be at least formally consulted in decision-making processes (int. 5, int. 24). The power of cooptation became visible for instance when with Ortega’s return to power many traditional Sandinista CSOs suddenly left the Coordinadora Civil (CC), by that time the largest and most influential CSO network. These CSOs suddenly seemed to feel uncomfortable with the CC’s
critical attitude regarding the state and authorities – be it because they changed their mind about the role of civil society or because many of their members now had got posts in the new government (int. 16).

The second attempt of cooptation refers to individual CSO leaders and civil society activists. In the last years, quite well-known personalities have suddenly abandoned their political ideas and former loyalties at the exchange of posts, influence and money under the head of the Sandinista party. A prominent example is the case of a former CSO representative who became vice minister for external cooperation under Ortega and now stands out as a harsh critic of autonomous organization and directs actions against the sector (int. 21). A likewise sudden and radical change occurred with a popular radio moderator who turned from the strongest critic into a loyal supporter of the Ortega government. Formerly one of the most prominent leftist critical voices, he is now propagating the party discourse via the radio La Primerísima, one of the most popular radio stations in the country, and has become one of the Sandinista party’s most prominent apologists (int. 15). An expert describes his sudden change of heart:

» … he did a U-turn, he was a tremendous critic of the government … a supposed leftist critique. And suddenly, he completely changed and now he is Danielista, how we call it, not even Sandinista but Danielista. « (Int. 15)

Furthermore, something similar happened with one of Nicaragua’s most prominent intellectuals and leftist thinkers who after Ortega’s return to power became one of the government’s most influential intellectual defenders and interpreters of the continued Revolution (int. 15).

In the end, this alignment of organizations and individuals to the government party goes along with a loss of their own agenda, a practical restriction of their spaces of action, and a unitized discourse in line with the Sandinista party’s policies.

6.1.2.2.2 Promoting loyal organizations

»In 2008, with the women’s movement, they created an association of women, named Blanca Arauz, who was Sandino’s wife. And they created it as a counterweight to the women’s movement, to the autonomous women’s movement. And this never … it was created only to appear in the photograph, and never worked, it doesn’t have a proper form, they do not unite, don’t talk with the women, it was no more than a letterhead. If you look for it today, you won’t find anything.« (Int. 7)

A third means of the Nicaraguan government to build up an alternative civil society sector is to foster the creation of new (counter) movements
and organizations loyal to its proper agenda. In practice, these tend to remain powerless, rather artificial *alibi* organizations. However, they might still compete with other CSOs regarding external funding and the population’s attention.

For example, in 2008 party-affiliated media\(^1\) announced the launch of a new women’s movement called Blanca Arauz – named after the wife of national hero Augusto César Sandino, eponym of the Sandinista party. The movement was presented as a direct counterbalance to the feminist women’s movement MAM which by that time found itself in an open conflict with the Ortega government. The new women’s movement Blanca Arauz presented itself as defending the dignity and rights of women and immediately took a stance for the first lady Rosario Murillo whom they found to suffer from malignant attacks by the political right. However, the new movement soon disappeared and experts agree that it was created only to appear on the photograph – or at least failed due to a lack of capacity and popular support (int. 24, int. 7).

Another example of the government’s promotion of loyal CSOs is the creation of the so-called Coordinadora Social as a new platform for first and foremost traditional Sandinista CSOs. Partisans around the Sandinista intellectual Orlando Nuñez had created this institution during opposition times as a counter-instance to the Coordinadora Civil, the by then strongest CSO network known for its criticism of authorities, which they knew would not stop short of a potential Sandinista government. (int. 7)

The two examples above are the most prominent and repeatedly cited. However, much suggests that the government is trying to create and promote loyal organizations in other occasions and areas as well. One expert from a foreign donor organization reported about what she called a »trojan horse« (int. 2), i.e. an attempt to apply for funding via an apparently co-opted or newly created organization, that struck the donor’s attention by its party language. Another example is the youth environmental movement Guardabaranco, funded by a Sandinista partisan. The interviewed experts criticize that its members never criticize the President’s agenda – and as a reward are consulted by the government on environmental issues while other CSOs are denied access and information. (int. 1)

An expert highlights the questionable autonomy and restricted space of action of these CSOs:

\(^1\) Radio la Primerísima 12.09.2008
6.1 Political-institutional challenges; the sector and the state

»The problem with the government’s model of civil society is that it is static, it’s rigid and it’s not autonomous. They don’t respond to the problems, they wait for the orders from above.« (Int. 7)

Taken together, the most important function of these newly created CSOs seems to be to give legitimacy to the government and its policies. First, by acting as counter-organizations to existing critical ones; second, by symbolizing support from the people; and, third, by serving as a concrete platform for mobilization and recruitment for mass events in support of the President.

6.1.2.2.3 Substitution

»It’s a para-state system. According to the FSLN’s model, civil society or the citizenry should be a mass organization, similar to the socialist model. The people have to participate, they have to be there, but just as a mass.« (Int. 21)

A third means with which the Nicaraguan government tries to control the CSO sector refers to the replacement of the former instances of citizen participation by local structures under the whip of the Sandinista party.

As already mentioned above, one of President Ortega’s first actions was to eliminate the CONPES at the national level and practically substitute the Consejos Departamentales and Municipales by proper structures. The new Citizen’s Power Councils (CPCs; later re-defined as »family cabinets«\(^\text{62}\)) practically reflect and melt with the local FSLN party structures, meaning a revival of the revolutionary system during the 1980s. They are vertically organized under the directive of the First Lady Rosario Murillo in her position as a head of the Citizens Communication Council. Although party membership is no official criteria to take part in a CPC, most of their members are members of the Sandinista party and the leaders are always FSLN members. The government sees and presents these CPCs as the true bodies of participation and direct democracy, as organizations of the barrios and the people, the women, the youth that serve as intermediaries between the people and their government. (int. 1, int. 2, int. 9, int. 10)

Nonetheless, the government’s acting evokes much criticism, particularly regarding the inherently biased conception of civic participation and

\(^{62}\) »Cabinetes de la Familia, la Comunidad y la Vida«; new term / model applied since about 2013.
6. The challenges

direct democracy. First of all, CPCs are criticized for their exclusivity, as they are practically the only local groups allowed to propose projects and heard by the government while others get excluded from information and access (int. 10, int. 9, int. 2). Besides, due to their party bias they are not suitable for the ever more expanding responsibilities they have and particularly the execution of public policies. Studies show that they tend to favor Sandinista partisans and select the beneficiaries according to party loyalty (int. 16, int. 2, int. 10). Moreover, their leaders are hesitant if not incapable of criticizing and improving these programs in the fear of hurting their party and losing their benefits (int. 16). The third criticism refers to the CPCs’ function to serve as a direct participation system while they principally consist of party militants. CPCs serve as a platform to unite, discuss, and talk, but in the end are completely dependent on the orders from above. People are encouraged to participate but as a supporting, sustaining mass without real influence (int. 10, int. 21).

»They are not critical, often they expect benefits in return or they do not want to hurt their party, their government. That’s why these organizations do not serve to develop public policies, they serve to implement the government’s social programs, to support the government, to present the government in the territories and push these programs. But not to improve them, not to criticize and improve these programs although there are always opportunities for improvement.« (Int. 16)

Altogether, as quoted above, the interviewed experts agree that these CPCs certainly fulfill important functions in Nicaraguan society. Nonetheless, they are classified rather as party structures than as independent civic organization representing the broad population. In practice, they serve as a recruitment source for party events, demonstrations, and elections (int. 10); they execute and support the government’s policies and serve as a control body to the population, able to interfere in many spheres of societal life – from the issuing of certificates to the organization of elections (int. 13).

6.1.2.3 Strategy 3; controlling the population

»It’s that the streets belong to the government’s people. Civil society is afraid to take to the streets, already.« (Int. 13)

Apart from its direct interference with the Nicaraguan CSO sector via the repression of dissenting and the promotion of party-loyal CSOs, the Ortega administration indirectly fortifies its control over the sector by
controlling the population as a target group and recruitment source. To do so, it refers to similar means as those applied towards the organizations, i.e. by force and by conviction or carrots and sticks. On the one side, the government uses its power and available means – in the form of resources, money and influence over public institutions – to coopt and attract people to the party and its loyal organizations. By that, it inhibits critical voices and the questioning of its policies, let alone mobilization and protest. On the other side, the government uses the same facilities to repress or discourage people to get engaged, to support or even become members of dissenting organizations.

The first measure of the Ortega administration to inhibit support for critical CSOs is to attract people and support with the help of material incentives like jobs, gifts, and money (int. 21). Starting point are the popular social programs. As their distribution and monitoring lies in the hands of the party loyal CPCs, non-party members and citizens who speak out aloud or mobilize against the government have to fear to be discriminated against if not excluded from the benefits (int. 9).

A similar means of control constitutes the public service. In the difficult economic context with the majority of Nicaraguans being informally employed, the government’s control over jobs in state institutions represents a considerable power. On the one hand, party membership increases the possibility to get a job, and the percentage of party members seems to grow steadily. On the other hand, criticism of Ortega’s presidency and membership in dissenting organizations can lead to arbitrary dismissals and disadvantages. The victims use to stand powerless against these measures in a context of weak and party-biased institutions (int. 7, int. 21). Moreover, the government uses the public service as well as a recruitment source for party events and government-supportive manifestations and it is said to oblige employees to participate in events and demonstrations in support of the President (int. 10, int. 3). An expert points out the benefits arising from this control for the government:

»Here we can see that each employee of the public service practically turns into one of the government’s instruments, to demonstrate that the population indeed is in favor of the government’s agenda.« (Int. 3)

Second, the government uses its ideologically charged discourse to bring the population back in line. In order to do so, it draws on the Revolution as a common historical experience and combines it with a leftist critique of imperial exploitation and the necessity to stand up against foreign influence and neoliberal ideas as supposedly propagated by the oppositional forces. At the same time, Ortega is presented as a President of the poor
and symbol of the Sandinista Revolution, and as a savior who will lead the historically exploited country from poverty and misery to prosperity. Against this background, criticizing the government and supporting oppositional forces is equated with a betrayal of the Revolution and the Nicaraguan people. The maxim »you are either with us or against us« is propagated by party organs and the growing media in the hand of President Ortega. (int. 21)

Last, in its attempt to control the population, the government does not refrain from the use of force for the repression of demonstrations and public activities. Although the government now tries to repress rather via administrative and less visible measures, public forces still come down hard when it comes to protests on the streets. This became visible for example in 2013 when the police tried to repress the demonstrations of Nicaraguan senior citizens for their pensions. Indeed, the President has made a point of demonstrating that the streets are in the hands of his supporters and considered as the Sandinista party’s realm (int. 2, int. 9). As a consequence, many ordinary people tend to move back and give up their protest as they are afraid of confrontation and violence (int. 1).

6.1.3 Summary: Political-institutional challenges

»Thus, civil society in this country cannot act as if ... as if there was a rule of law.« (Int. 7)

The heading political-institutional challenges was attributed to those that arise from the duality of a government ambivalent towards CSOs and citizen engagement and a weak institutional context. This ambivalence manifests on the one hand in the government’s promotion of the idea of »popular civil society« referring to government-supportive organizations that help to execute its policies and organize society. On the other, it becomes evident in its fear of all CSOs autonomous from the party that results in a harsh critique of the concept of civil society. The term is considered as exploited by post-colonial and neoliberal powers trying to subordinate the country by opposing the national government and its policies.

This ambivalent attitude towards CSOs directly discharges in the attempt to gain control over the sector. To do so, the government applies a threefold strategy; first of all, the repression of critical CSOs via direct persecution, administrative harassment, denial of access and information and the monitoring of international cooperation. Second, the promotion of a government-loyal CSO sector via the cooptation of CSOs, the promotion
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Next to the challenges related to the political-institutional dimension of regime-hybricity, the socio-economic context poses a challenge to the Nicaraguan CSO sector as well. According to the interviewed experts, two major issues arise. First, the challenges resulting from the high levels of poverty and inequality among the Nicaraguan population. These affect if not impair citizen engagement and the sector’s ability to pressure change from below (6.2.1). Second, many organizations’ historical dependency on resources and support from international cooperation. This dependency has always shaped the sector’s structure and orientation and is turning into a major pitfall in the face of donors’ present withdrawal from Nicaragua (6.2.2).

6.2.1 A population occupied with making ends meet

»In every society there have to be middle classes, so to say people with their basic needs resolved and with a level of education, mental, intellectual formation that allows them to reclaim more than the basics, further liberties. In Nicaragua there is not much of a middle class, it just doesn’t exist.« (Int. 13)
A first challenge related to the socio-economic context constitutes the widespread poverty among the Nicaraguan population. As stated in chapter 4, two-thirds of the population live below poverty line. Experts assume that this impacts the CSO sector in three different ways. First, the socio-economic situation restricts the overall degree of citizen engagement and participation. Second, it influences how and for which objectives citizens engage. Moreover, third, it enhances indifference and resignation within the population concerning the autocratic tendencies of the governing elite (int. 7, int. 13). Taken together, these impacts are likely to restrict the CSO sector’s overall potential to bring about democratic change.

One major problem experts see is that the majority of the Nicaraguan population is completely occupied with making ends meet. Most Nicaraguans do not have the time, the money, nor the capacity to care about becoming engaged and participate as they have to care about their nutrition and daily survival first (int. 13). In the quote above, an expert highlights this concentration on the individual bare necessities and ignorance of broader societal and political issues in the face of the broad population’s day-to-day struggle to get by.

Second and closely related to that, if Nicaraguan citizens get engaged, they are more likely to care about socio-economic issues and immediate day-to-day improvements than to stand up for liberties, citizens’ rights and the country’s long-term development. Intangible goods naturally become less valuable for many citizens as long as their basic needs are not resolved. In this context, the lack of a broad middle class, eager and capable of reclaiming liberties and rights, weakens the critical potential and strength of the Nicaraguan CSO sector (int. 3, int. 13). With a population occupied with bringing through their families and a political and economic elite unwilling to give up their privileges, the country lacks a critical mass that could stand up for societal change and question the persisting hybrid regime structures (int. 13). Indeed, in Nicaragua particularly CSOs engaged in the struggle for democratic liberties, rights, and long-term development have difficulties to reach and mobilize the people for their concerns. This is particularly true for many organizations working on minorities’ rights, sustainability or women’s emancipation. At the same time, those providing social services and assistance are closer to the population and tend to find stronger favor. (int. 7, int. 21)

Furthermore, a third argument is that the impoverished Nicaraguan population is more prone to accept autocratic tendencies by the governing elite if it is in the exchange of benefits. The interviewed experts point out that due to widespread poverty Nicaraguan people content themselves
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with little, such as the benefits from social programs, or promises for social change and revolution. In the meantime they are likely to tolerate autocratic tendencies, corruption, or other malpractices without resistance or protest (int. 9). Against this background, an expert cites a common proverb in Nicaragua, »all politicians steal, but this one at least helps us«, in order to explain the high level of tolerance regarding corruption and autocratic practices (int. 9). After all, for many Nicaraguans the gifts provided by the current government – be it cows and chicken (Hambrecero), zinc for their roofs (Plan Techo) or subsided public transport – superpose the same President’s autocratic behavior and clientelistic policies.

Against this background, experts claim that as long as the present political and economic elite believably manages to promise benefits and the President successfully upholds his image as President of the poor, massive protest and engagement against his autocratic style of government are unlikely (int. 9, int. 21). As compared to the accelerated impoverishment during the preceding neoliberal years, Ortega in the eyes of many people at least pretends to care about the poor. For parts of the CSO sector, however, this results in difficulties to recruit volunteers, particularly for more elaborate issues such as civic and political liberties or good governance. Moreover, these CSOs risk becoming an elitist sphere and exclusive employment and engagement field for the tiny Nicaraguan middle class.

6.2.2 A sector dependent on international support

»This is an economically dependent country. That’s to say, the very CSOs have to live with the cancer of international cooperation.« (Int. 11)

The second challenge related to the socio-economic context is the Nicaraguan CSO sector’s traditional high dependency on funding and support from international cooperation and external donors. Experts acknowledge the importance of this financial and ideational support for the historical evolution, development and strength of the Nicaraguan civil society sector. Foreign funding has been particularly important in the face of a lack of resources and political will to support CSOs from the side of the state as well as from private national enterprises (int. 4, int. 15). However, experts see part of the sector’s strong dependency on international cooperation at the same time as one of its major challenges as it threatens the organizations’ genuine features, originality, and representation. More precisely, they refer to the substantial impact of foreign donors on the structure of the CSO sector that manifests in enforced processes of
NGO-ization, bureaucratization, and project-orientation (6.2.2.1). Second, they criticize foreign donors’ influence on topics and working fields, based on cyclical trends in development assistance, as well as their proper interests and political motives (6.2.2.2). Third, challenges arise out of the donors’ proper inconsequence concerning the autocratic behavior of the Nicaraguan government and their own weaknesses concerning transparency, coordination, and reliability (6.2.2.3). Moreover, last, a major problem for Nicaraguan CSOs arises by the time of a withdrawal of donors as it has been taking place since 2008 (6.2.2.4).

6.2.2.1 Donors’ influence on the formal structure of CSOs

»The big problem is that Nicaragua went through a revolution in which everything was done by mysticism to an NGO-ization in which everything was done in projects, with employees, with militants from 8 to 5, with employees like public servants.« (Int. 21)

A first challenge for the Nicaraguan CSO sector resulting from its dependence on international cooperation constitutes the donors’ impact on the formal structure of CSOs. This happens in the form of intensified processes of bureaucratization, project-orientation and NGO-ization and is due to the donors’ claim for transparency, administrative standards, and comparability regarding the selection and work with partner organizations and projects. The resulting formalization and materialization of the sector have attracted much criticism among CSOs themselves. Donors insist on the increased efficiency and quality of CSOs’ work and the creation of guaranteed standards by helping organizations to be accountable, transparent, to formulate strategies and three-year-plans and to economize and keep to the budget. Still, the resulting artificiality and materialization of the sector and the pressure for professionalization risk dissociating organizations from their roots and primary interests. The interviewed experts bemoan that the selection criteria applied to partner organizations, the high administrative standards required by donors and the increasing competition for funding between organizations intensify the pressure and have enforced quarrels and disunity within the Nicaraguan CSO sector (int. 5, int. 21, int. 27).

The first remarkable impact of donors on the sector is that of NGO-ization, referring to the formalization and increasing number of professionally working organizations which dispose of paid staff and a legal status as a nonprofit organization. This trend was set in motion by the do-
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nors’ selection criteria that stipulate a legal personality status, previous experience in the field, and a high degree of administrative capacity in the organizations (int. 12). Experts criticized this trend towards professionalization as discriminating smaller and inexperienced CSOs and restricting the dynamics of the sector. Most of all, it disadvantages those organizations unable or unwilling to obtain a legal status in the current political context (int. 21). An expert on the Nicaraguan women’s movement claims:

»There have been many discussions about that and I think it was one of the reasons why there has been this diaspora of organizations. Because there was a lot of criticism, as there are always different perspectives including those who believe that the movement stopped to be a social, broad movement due to NGO-ization. And this is seen by many leaders of the movement as a setback. Because the NGO has to respond to an organization, to a donor and often even to a government. When you become an NGO, you face these limitations.« (Int. 27)

However, although donors know about these disadvantages they claim that a legal status is important in the present context. Although it does not guarantee an organization’s quality, it facilitates cooperation, helps CSOs to survive and fulfill their administrative requirements (int. 5, int. 12).

Second, the increasing number of NGOs goes along with a general trend towards bureaucratization. To adhere to the general high administrative standards of donors, organizations have to elaborate different types of proposals, familiarize with various formats of accountability and financial reports. As a consequence, they have to employ professional, often foreign staff disposing of the necessary expertise and capacities. CSOs funded by foreign donors are forced to spend more time in administration than in their thematic work and in achieving their goals. At the same time this again requires resources and expertise and hence discriminates against smaller and informal CSOs. In the end, the interviewed experts criticize that international cooperation in that way promotes a bureaucratic and civia−
tic civil society that loses its militancy, devotion, and idealism (int. 21, int. 12) – which is particularly problematic in the face of an increasingly autocratic government:

»I would say that we’ve promoted a Rousseauian attitude within civil society, that of a good citizen, civic virtues. The problem is that with the FSLN we have a government that does not respect these civic virtues but it violates them, it violates your rights. And sometimes you have to protest in order to enforce your rights.« (Int. 7)

Furthermore, third, international donors have enforced the orientation on projects and short term cycles as general trends within development assis-
tance favor project funding instead of institutional support. This tendency results in a steadily changing focus on different topics, the need for CSOs to permanently solicit funding and a bureaucratic execution of projects reduced to short time periods. This project-orientation is criticized for impeding deep, structural changes and for making CSOs lose out of sight their objectives and target groups. In the permanent strife for money and project acquisition to guarantee the continuity of their organization, Nicaraguan CSOs risk to subordinate and neglect their original agenda (int. 2, int. 28).

On the whole, it is evident that the requirements and standards of international donors influence the formal structure of the Nicaraguan CSO sector in various ways. They increase the level of time and resources spent on administration, favour the development of experienced, bigger and professional NGOs and their competition amongst each other, and promote the focus on temporary projects instead of long-term goals. As a consequence, over time parts of the Nicaraguan CSO sector have turned into an »industry to generate resources« (int. 21), and CSOs become a working field for the middle class. Moreover, this happens at the expense of smaller, informal CSOs, tampers the sector’s movement character and internal dynamics while restricting its ability to adhere to the population’s real needs.

6.2.2.2 Donors’ influence on topics and working fields

»However, international cooperation often falsifies social organizations as it matures or tries to mature them from the outside, with money, with objectives. So donors now want gender perspectives, but next year they want the construction of latrines, and in the following year they want something else … and as everyone depends on the funding, this prevents real development.« (Int. 13)

Next to donors’ questionable impact on the formal structure of the sector, a likewise challenge presents their influence on the major working fields and the agenda of CSOs in Nicaragua. After all, projects or buzzwords preferred and funded by foreign donors are subject to cyclical discourses within international development assistance as well as to their proper loyalties and agenda.

A first problem is the selection of projects and preferential working fields by donors depending on roughly changing economic trends and trendy topics. These are directly linked to the trends in international development assistance and may constantly vary – from the promotion of environmental protection over the fight against gender-related injustices to
educational issues. Thereby, these trends do not naturally reflect the country’s or population’s most urgent needs and neither automatically enhance long-term development perspectives (int. 2, int. 13). Another criticism is that these trendy topics are developed within offices of well-paid development assistants instead of originating within the country and out of need by the affected population itself (int. 13, int. 15).

Related to Nicaragua, the interviewed experts mention several issues promoted by donors that – although highly relevant – are perceived by large parts of the population as elitist and worlds apart from their real and most urgent needs. These include the insistence of donors on the issue of accountability, the promotion of TLGC rights, feminist emancipation and particular civic liberties (int. 15). Furthermore, experts criticize the vast amounts of money spent in consulting studies and evaluations that do not directly benefit the population (int. 15). Against this background, they point to the »fickle« (int. 28) character of international cooperation, criticizing that donors only support an idea a certain period of time and rapidly switch to other regions, topics, and working fields (int. 3). As a consequence, they point out that money flows of international cooperation have made Nicaraguan CSOs act opportunistically. While trying to adapt to donors’ changing priorities they risk losing sight of their basis, their proper strengths and objectives (int. 13).

»Most of the organizations are struggling to survive or haven’t managed to strategically reorient in the given situation, to see where they come from, what is their basis, who’s their constituency, what is the situation and how can they still engage. And the reason is that in the past, and we have to be aware as donors that it’s partly our fault as well, many organizations acted opportunistically in the face of available funds. According to the motto: if there’s money for environment, I’ll do an environmental project, if there’s money against child labor, I’ll do a project with children. That’s to say many organizations have just forgotten about who they are, what are their strengths and who’s their basis that they represent and that supports them – due to the influx of funds over the last years.« (Int. 2)

The second criticism related to donors’ impact on topics and working fields is that the basis for their selection of projects is not ostensibly philanthropic, altruistic thinking but motivated by their particular interests, geopolitical thoughts and political agenda (int. 28). Next to adhering to general trends in international development assistance, projects funded by donors use to be linked to their interests as countries, societies, organizations or governments. As a consequence, they do not necessarily constitute a support for the local population. Indeed, for the Nicaraguan case, experts admit that several projects promoted in the past benefited more to the interests of international donors than to the Nicaraguan people (int. 15). In
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In this context, they particularly mention donors’ direct cooperation with enterprises to raise popularity for their projects and investments in the country (int. 28, int. 15). Also, they refer to the lack of funding for issues that may stand against donor countries’ particular interests – for example concerning working conditions in textile factories, coal mining projects or the production of specific products that stand in competition to European or North American markets. Moreover, last, they criticize donors’ support and the promotion of CSOs as powerful competitors to Nicaraguan state institutions while they remain accountable only to donors (int. 21, int. 15).

On the whole, the findings show that the impact of international cooperation on topics and working fields poses a considerable challenge to the Nicaraguan CSO sector. Not only do the changing priorities not evolve from the population itself and are sometimes far away from its actual needs, but their short-term character also risks to undermine long-term societal change and development.

6.2.2.3 Donors’ unassertive attitude towards the Nicaraguan government

»They don’t want to interfere in political issues. Because if you want to establish democratic governance and the rule of law, institutionalism, transparency in the voting process, you will immediately come into conflict with the government (…). This is why I told you a moment ago that they somehow discarded the claim for democracy and democratic governance which were conditions for whatever type of cooperation, but not anymore. Rather, they strive towards a different type of cooperation, for children’s health, education, support to families etc. – issues that don’t touch the problems of democratic governance which inevitably are political problems.« (Int. 23)

Another criticism in the context of Nicaraguan CSOs’ dependence on international cooperation concerns the donors’ unassertive attitude towards the government’s repression of parts of the sector and its attempt to interfere and monitor international support to CSOs. Their indecisiveness and weakness, in turn, risks favoring or reproducing repression and exclusion of parts of the sector.

The interviewed experts criticize that one major source of problems for Nicaraguan CSOs is the hesitant attitude of donors towards the Nicaraguan government. They bemoan the lack of a consistent position towards authoritarian tendencies particularly regarding the repression of parts of the CSO sector (int. 32, int. 2). CSO representatives notice that donors adapt their projects and calls, their selection of partner organizations and focuses to the Nicaraguan government’s will and withdraw from controversial or
conflictive working fields. Practically, donors’ support for democratic governance, transparency, and human rights including women and the indigenous population, has diminished over time. At the same time, funding is primarily given to less conflictive working fields such as health, education or smaller environmental issues. In turn, funding is diminishing for organizations basing their work on advocacy, lobbying and civic activism while there is a growing industry for service provision and assistance. (int. 8, int. 28, int. 32, int. 23, int. 14, int. 18)

From the interviews, one can derive three reasons for this attitude of donors in Nicaragua. First, experts point out that international cooperation’s general compromise to the principles of democracy, constitutional legality, and good governance has been diminishing over the years. More precisely, they claim that donors’ determination to make these values a condition for cooperation with CSOs and a key reference for the selection of projects and partners has weakened (int. 23, int. 8). Second, critics attest donors a lack of ideology, motivation, and courage. They emphasize the structural and personal reasons for their often hesitant attitudes. As illustrated in the quote below, it is often even their staff’s personal commitment and binding to the country and its people and their preoccupation with the continuity of their jobs or projects which makes individual project managers back down and assimilate rather than oppose policies of repression and discrimination (int. 21).

»The officers of international NGOs are socially engaged people, but they aren’t activists, the time of activists in international organizations has passed. These people have contracts, wives, children. And this government has been clear: if there’s anything they don’t like about you, they throw you out. And these people, I think they just try to keep up. (...) Because they have a lot of people dependent on them, they have their wives, their children, some are in love with Nicaraguans … it’s that in other countries they’d live in small places, but here they live in big houses with employees, they have large cars, they can go to the beach. Thus, there are reasons, even trivial reasons, up to personal vanities, ambitions, prudence … or up to the wish to not become known for the rest of your life as the one who got thrown out of Nicaragua.« (Int. 21)

A third reason is that most even long-term donors in Nicaragua seem to fail to communicate to agree on common strategies and might even obstruct one another. Although donors use to criticize Nicaraguan CSOs for their lack of cohesion, communication, coordination, reliability, and transparency, they often fail to act according to these principles themselves. Experts emphasize that donor institutions from the same country or region fail to communicate and agree upon which organizations and projects to fund and to guarantee transparency of funding and decision-making pro-
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In practice, this leads to double financing of the same organizations and encourages Nicaraguan CSOs to solicit the same projects and receive funding from different donors (int. 2, int. 5). Altogether, it appears as if each one is rather struggling alone, due to their pressure to account not only for the Nicaraguan government but also to protect the national interests of their countries, due to competition within the donor industry and helplessness in the face of the present political structures in Nicaragua.

International cooperation to Nicaragua, from this perspective, has become limited, conditioned and »neutralized« (int. 24) as a consequence of donors’ attempt to self-restrict, adapt, and alienate to the given context (int. 24). Hence, the unassertive attitude of donors towards the Nicaraguan government additionally debilitates the CSO sector as they risk reproducing or even enforcing existing pressures. On the whole, donors’ proper restraints or malpractices immanent to the international cooperation industry seem to enforce the perceived insecurity and arbitrariness within the Nicaraguan CSO sector.

6.2.2.4 The withdrawal of donors

»I think that the challenges ... the challenge is to survive without international cooperation.« (Int. 21)

A last major challenge for Nicaraguan CSOs arising from the sector’s dependency on international cooperation refers to the current withdrawal of donors that started in 2007/8. This cut off of funding and support has been a painful reminder of the vulnerability and dependency of Nicaraguan CSOs on the goodwill, interest, and economic resources of foreign donors. Moreover, it opened many CSO leaders' eyes regarding their historical orientation and adaptation to externally given standards, keywords, projects, and formal procedures.

As outlined earlier, the recent withdrawal of donors concerns bilateral and multilateral development assistance as well as private cooperation. It becomes manifest in the close-down of several embassies, the decrease of projects, calls and money, and the withdrawal of international NGOs. Besides, the withdrawal includes major donor countries from Europe and North America which have been working in Nicaragua for more than 30 years. Experts bemoan the phase out of the so-called Nordic countries historically represented in Nicaragua such as Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. Additionally, there is a decline in funding from Germany and a
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nearly complete loss of Spain as the formerly biggest donor in Latin America due to the country’s proper economic crisis. (int. 4, int. 28)

Given the strong financial dependency of CSOs on external funding, the decline of resources has shaken the Nicaraguan CSO sector to the core. Many organizations struggle to survive as institutional funding is cut, projects phase out, and the number of new calls for funding is diminishing. Besides, the situation enforces the competition between CSOs for the remaining funds – obstructing cooperation and strengthening mistrust within the sector (int. 12). Furthermore, CSOs now have to put even more effort into the acquisition of funding at the expense of focusing on their real work and agenda (int. 12). Many traditional, historical organizations suffer from the loss of qualified and experienced staff and their institutional memory built up during decades. In the present context, they have to hire and fire their employees with adverse effects on the quality of their work (int. 12).

However, difficulties arise not only out of the sudden lack of money but as well out of the lack of autonomy and a proper agenda of many CSOs due to their historical dependency on donors. Donors and CSOs alike notice that apart from financial problems CSOs have difficulties to adapt to the new context, find new strategies, reorient and establish a proper agenda. This is no surprise after a lifelong orientation on predetermined topics, working fields and administrative standards (int. 2). Therefore, one CSO representative even sees the withdrawal and changing context as a chance for CSOs to become more independent and start a re-orientation of the CSO sector, resolving some of the historically misguided developments and dependencies (int. 24). Nicaraguan CSOs have to find their own way, become autonomous organizations neither dependent on the state nor on the goodwill and financial resources from international cooperation. In this context, experts advocate the emergence of an independent CSO sector where external resources should not be a condition for survival but a way how to multiply and enforce their daily work (int. 21).

Altogether, the interviewed experts present the ongoing withdrawal of donors as a slap in the face for many CSOs that in the end even corroborates the present hybrid regime structures. The international community, after all, leaves the Nicaraguan CSO sector high and dry in an increasingly challenging political context.
6. The challenges

6.2.3 Summary: Socio-economic challenges

The previous chapters illustrated the challenges that result for the Nicaraguan CSO sector out of the socio-economic dimension of hybrid regime structures.

On the one hand, these challenges concern the widespread poverty among the Nicaraguan population that restricts citizen engagement and makes citizens prone to accept autocratic tendencies in the exchange of benefits. On the other, Nicaragua’s economic context has made the sector dependent on international cooperation resulting in a strong influence of donors who since the beginning have shaped the structure and working fields of the Nicaraguan CSO sector.

The next chapter presents the findings on the socio-cultural dimension of regime-hybridity in Nicaragua and the challenges it poses for the CSO sector.

6.3 Socio-cultural challenges

»Yes – I don’t care if they violate the Constitution, the laws or if the entire forest declines or if they build a canal or not – I don’t have time for that, I spend all of my time trying to feed my five children, right, that are growing up, right. – So that’s not easy, to build up this critical mass there have to be people with their basic needs resolved.« (Int. 13)

The previous two chapters outlined the challenges arising for the CSO sector related to the political and socio-economic dimensions of hybrid regime structures in Nicaragua. This chapter deals with those challenges that can be related to the socio-cultural context which, as described in chapter 5, is marked by the lacking anchorage of democratic values and of a democratic political culture. This poses challenges to the CSO sector concerning the population’s appreciation of citizen engagement, respectively the population’s accessibility as a source of recruitment and target group (6.3.1). Also, it affects the internal values and organization of CSOs themselves (6.3.2).

6.3.1 Lack of expertise and appreciation within the population

»A democratic culture implies that there is an awareness of citizenship and it’s an awareness of rights and duties. But the majority of Nicaraguans imagine, think about it as a kind of identity card; 'I was born in Nicaragua, I am Nicaraguan, long
live the flag, the national tree, the national bird’ – but it’s about rights, I have rights to reclaim vis-à-vis the government!« (Int. 13)

The first challenge related to the socio-cultural dimension of hybrid regime structures results from the lacking experience and anchorage of democratic values and a democratic political culture in the Nicaraguan population. This poses a challenge to the CSO sector as it translates into a lack of understanding and appreciation of the idea of participation and civic engagement.

First of all, experts identify a vague understanding of citizenship among the Nicaraguan people. As in the quote above, this is expressed in a general lack of knowledge and interest in their rights and duties as citizens (int. 13). Experts state that the deficient education system enforces this lacking appreciation of citizens’ rights and civic engagement. According to them, in Nicaragua even the families and the schools are places of authoritarianism, there is little room for debate and critical thought or a promotion of the idea of participation and responsible citizens (int. 13). One of them states:

»I don’t like to understand democracy in the let’s say official way as it is normally understood. If democracy is debate, if democracy is pluralism, if democracy is to respect differences, minorities, there has never been democracy in Nicaragua and it doesn’t exist today. Because it doesn’t exist in the families. In Nicaragua, the families are spaces of authoritarianism, marked by the absence of paternal responsibility, in many households there is no paternal figure etc. And there isn’t democracy in the schools either, the schools in Nicaragua are spaces of authoritarianism, of formality, there is no culture of debate, no promotion of critical thought etc.« (Int. 13)

Against this background, they particularly criticize the country’s political and economic elite for their lack of responsibility and understanding; these have failed to care about education and the importance to teach the liberty of association and promote democracy – particularly regarding the high levels of poverty and ignorance among the poor population (int. 3, int. 13).

Another criticism is that the country has not managed to overcome its culture of violence yet. The central argument is that conflicts in Nicaragua have always been solved with violence, replacing one dictator or caudillo with a new one. This is why the idea of civic or peaceful protest is under-developed and Nicaraguan society marked by fatigue and the fear of a repetition of the country’s violent past (int. 12, int. 13).

Taken together, this widespread ignorance and fear result in high levels of passivity and apathy among the Nicaraguan population. Experts claim that people end up accommodating to the present circumstances and hybrid regime structures instead of standing up for their rights and liberties.
6. The challenges

They do so because the idea of participation for rights and liberties is less prominent in Nicaragua and because they fear that by getting engaged they could lose more than they could win. The stagnating consolidation process has further increased the levels of hesitation and the lack of motivation among the population that is loosing its trust in a different future (int. 3, int. 13).

On the whole, the findings show that the socio-cultural legacies in the form of a weak democratic political culture and a lacking internalization of democratic values not only affect Nicaragua's political elite. Rather, they prevent the broad population from getting engaged and standing up for their rights, becoming a critical mass, and resisting against autocratic practices (int. 3). And not least, they make it difficult for CSOs to recruit people and sell their work – particularly for those organizations engaged in the fields of democracy promotion, human rights or good governance and participation.

6.3.2 Deficiencies of CSOs

»It’s that only united we can build up a resistance. But we don’t have reached the point where we unite to be part of the resistance yet. This is what we lack.« (Int. 4)

Next to the general lack of knowledge and appreciation of civic participation, there is a second set of challenges for CSOs linked to the socio-cultural context in Nicaragua. The include the persistence of hierarchical structures and autocratic values within the very organizations, a consequent lack of solidarity and cohesion within the sector and an incapacity of CSOs to sell their work to the broad population.

6.3.2.1 Persistence of autocratic structures and values

»My personal opinion is that there is much hierarchy within civil society or within the CSOs, quite similar to the kind of leadership of the party because a lot of people have their roots in the FSLN. So they have a quite complex political culture, much conspiracy, little confidence. It’s very state-like, very autocratic, few networks, little horizontal work. There are CSO directors that have been in power for 20 years, they are eternal, the organization practically belongs to them. And because of that it’s difficult, because they always strive for hegemony and conspiracy, and that doesn’t help.« (Int. 4)
A first challenge lies in the persisting hierarchical structures and autocratic values and behavior within CSOs themselves. Experts highlight the fact that CSO representatives and their organizations naturally show the same attitudes as Nicaraguan society as such (int. 13). Besides, they emphasize that the understanding of civil society in Nicaragua is usually linked to traditional values and inspired by the hierarchical organization during the Revolution (int. 3).

In Nicaragua, many CSOs suffer from a vertical government style, personalistic leadership including leaders who chair an organization for more than 20 years, as quoted above. Patriarchal structures persist as women have difficulties to become leaders of mixed organizations, their participation is often reduced to voluntary work while men stay responsible for strategic planning and decision making (int. 24, int. 27). Experts bemoan that these characteristics lead to internal struggles within the sector and to a loss of its credibility and support. In this context, one of them claims that »we have to implement in our CSOs the same values that we demand from our government, country, and population« (int. 16). This refers to the rotation of leaders, the principle of generational change and the general democratic infrastructure within organizations (int. 16, int. 4, int. 12).

Against this background, the Nicaraguan CSO sector also suffers from a lack of strategic orientation including the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and to set up new strategies in the face of the indurated hybrid regime structures (int. 7). Experts notice that CSOs keep working with the same strategies as 10 or 15 years ago and seem incapable to renovate and adapt or revise, for example in the face of the autocratic behavior of current President Ortega (int. 5).

Altogether, the need to overcome these persisting autocratic structures and values within the organizations themselves becomes particularly relevant concerning their position and legitimacy to fight for democratic consolidation.

6.3.2.2 Lack of solidarity and cohesion within the sector

»It’s a constant back and forth. We proceed, we managed to gather a group of organizations, some coalitions for concerted actions, we developed some strategies together. But we still lack I don’t know whether it’s the savoir-faire or whether it’s a cultural issue, but somehow we didn’t manage to consolidate these structures yet.« (Int. 11)
The attested persistence of autocratic structures and values within the CSO sector itself goes along with a lack of solidarity and cohesion. Experts attest an inability or unwillingness of organizations to cooperate, communicate with each other, and share their strengths. This enforces internal struggles and fragmentation within the sector and restricts the work of CSOs.

Experts claim that CSOs in Nicaragua manage to only come together in isolated cases and exchange ideas for some concerted actions and specific projects (such as women’s organizations against the abolition of abortion or right now many groups in the face of the canal project). However, apart from that or behind the scenes, CSOs do seldom communicate and show huge disparities and internal contradictions including even those working in the same area or same working fields (int. 13, int. 2, int. 12, int. 4). This can be attributed on the one hand to the individualistic and personalistic governance of CSOs, on the other to the increasing competition for funding if not a general lack of »savoir faire« as stated in the quote above.

A further difficulty in this context constitutes the high degree of politicization within the sector. This is due to the historical polarization of the country and its resulting division between Sandinistas and non-Sandinistas. Besides, politicization has been enforced by the increasingly autocratic style of President Ortega and the general weakness of oppositional political parties. In practice, this politicization is reflected in political aspirations of some organizations that try to substitute political parties – be it close to the government or to oppositional forces – and not least the growing political struggles within the sector. Experts criticize that at least some CSOs exceed their functions or confuse their roles and by that risk to lose legitimacy, strengthen the polarization and weaken the whole sector (int. 13: int. 16).

As a consequence, experts claim that CSOs in Nicaragua need to cooperate more, build alliances, develop common strategies, and to understand that only organized they can bring about real change (int. 3, int. 11, int. 4).

6.3.2.3 Failure to sell their merits to the population

»We are an agent of change but I think that within the very sector we haven’t managed to reflect our contribution to society. I think that, and this is not only about Nicaragua, it’s on a global scale, the contribution of civil society as an actor of change has not been sufficiently written down, reflected, published, sold. This is something that we lack, we always focus on our work – but we haven’t really understood how to sell it.« (Int. 1)

Further challenges for the CSO sector closely linked to the country’s socio-cultural development constitute part of the sector’s perception as elitist...
and distant from the broad population, a practical lack of quality and expertise and the organizations’ consequent failure to successfully sell their contribution to society.

Many organizations tend to be perceived as artificial, professional, and elitist, disconnected from the population, its basic needs and thinking. Experts claim that CSOs so far have failed to sell their work successfully and that they are weak in communicating their public value and significant role for the national development of the country (int. 1, int. 4). Enforced by the increasing distance and professionalism of particularly the bigger NGOs, the sector fails to seek legitimacy in the eyes of the population (int. 4).

This questionable distance to the people is firstly related to the sector’s characteristic as a field of activity of the tiny Nicaraguan middle class, as well as to its closeness and entanglement with international donors. Second, it is related to some organizations’ focus on big issues such as diversity, social and civil rights and even materialistic rights which are criticized as being difficult to place with the majority of the population. (int. 7)

6.3.3 Summary: Socio-cultural challenges

The findings show that Nicaragua's socio-cultural legacies in the form of the deficient anchorage of democratic values pose a further challenge to the Nicaraguan CSO sector. On the one hand, they restrict civic engagement and the appreciation of CSOs among the general population, impacting on their role as recruitment source, supporters and target group of CSOs. On the other, they are also reflected within the very CSO sector, translating into a persistence of autocratic values within organizations and into a lack of solidarity and capacity to organize and cooperate and to sell its work to the population.

Taken together, the previous chapters illustrated the findings on the political, socio-economic and socio-cultural challenges arising for CSOs related to the hybrid regime structures in Nicaragua. As a next step, the following chapter classifies the Nicaraguan CSO sector in the form of a three-part typology. The classification was derived from the experts’ interviews and further developed based on the interviews with CSO leaders in the second part of the study. Moreover, the chapter highlights the consequences and visible effects which the overall context seems to have upon the different groups of CSOs and their potential to challenge the present status quo.
7. The sector

The previous chapters shed light on the manifestation of hybrid regime structures in Nicaragua (5.) and worked out the most salient challenges faced by CSOs in the present context (6.). The remaining research questions three and four (RQ3 / RQ4) address the classification of the Nicaraguan CSO sector and the elaboration of a (functional) typology of organizations concerning their potential to bring about change in the given context.

This chapter starts by introducing three different groups of organizations that characterize the Nicaraguan CSO sector – briefly sketching their evolution, exemplary cases, and key features (7.1). The three-part classification was developed on the basis of the experts’ evaluations\(^{63}\) and in view of the organizations’ role in the current regime context. Based on this rough typology, chapter 7.2 further characterizes the different groups of CSOs by presenting the findings from interviews conducted with CSO leaders in the second part of the study. A comparative analysis contraposes their particular features and narratives – regarding their members and their motivation, the underlying concept of civil society, the presentation of their agenda, their perceived challenges and their self-positioning as CSOs in the present political context.

7.1 The three-part division of the Nicaraguan CSO sector

The following sections briefly summarize three major groups of organizations that characterize the Nicaraguan CSO sector. They will be termed as critical, de-political, and party loyal CSOs based on the interviewed experts’ descriptions.

\(^{63}\) The guide contained a question for the classification of the Nicaraguan CSO sector. Naturally, the classifications and terms provided by the interviewed experts slightly varied. The presented three-part classification and terms were derived based on an analysis of all 19 interviews.
7.1.1 Critical CSOs

»To my mind, these people share a way of thinking that is more autonomous, more likely to support liberties, it’s a rather liberal, more emancipated way of thinking.« (Int. 21)

The first group of CSOs in Nicaragua is described by the interviewed experts as the most »independent« and »belligerent« part of civil society (int. 9, int. 15, int. 16). It stands out for its predominantly politically oriented agenda and engagement in fields such as human rights, participation or good governance. This group was often termed critical civil society due to its skeptical attitude towards authorities and the current regime structures.

Most of these organizations have a long tradition in the country. Some originated in the member-based organizations of the Sandinista Revolution, others emerged during the boom of CSOs and initiatives starting around 1990. From the beginning on, they used the emerging spaces and the new societal spirit after decades of autocratic rule trying to shape the development of political structures and practices. Their leaders tend to be intellectuals or academics who found a new engagement and sometimes even employment field in their organization (int. 21, int. 16).

One of the most prominent figures from the outset was the Coordinadora Civil (CC), a network of organizations founded after Hurricane Mitch in 1998 to construct and help in cases of emergencies and coordinate international assistance in the face of the government’s failure. Quickly, the CC turned into the biggest CSO network and by and by refocused its agenda on citizens’ rights and participation. Today it is still active but somehow divided and less influential (int. 16). Equally characteristic of this group of CSOs are large parts of the Nicaraguan women’s movement that has become known for its belligerence and strength even beyond national borders. The movement includes many feminist organizations and those more moderate that became independent from the Sandinista party during the 1990s. Counting among the most prominent examples are the MAM (Autonomous Women’s Movement), the feminist movement (Movimiento Feminista de Nicaragua) and various other small organizations that stand out for their autonomy from party-political structures and their belligerence (int. 15).

The majority of these organizations does not dispose of a legal personality. Some of them purposely insist on their movement character, out of fear to lose their linkage to the broad population, thinking that this would do more damage than good. For others, it is just impossible to request and obtain a legal personality under the given circumstances (int. 16).
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Altogether, the interviewed experts agree that this first group of organizations is the one with the most obvious difficulties in the present regime context. On the one hand, because these are most affected by the Nicaraguan governments’ accusations and persecution due to their engagement in often controversial working fields and their attempt to incite politically and shape the political process. On the other hand, because these organizations are also suffering from the withdrawing support of international co-operation outlined in the previous chapters (int. 15, int. 16, int. 32).

7.1.2 De-political CSOs

»It’s a group that is totally linked to the realization of social work, sometimes welfare-based, and which somehow has found a political space because it’s a group that does not come into conflict neither with the government nor with any political scheme.« (Int. 15)

The second group of CSOs in Nicaragua embraces those organizations usually titled as de-political civil society by the interviewed experts. In its evolution and orientation it is most closely linked to the history and De-political dynamics of international cooperation and solidarity in Nicaragua. Moreover, it stands out for its socio-economic orientation and work in the fields of health, education, poverty reduction, and vulnerable groups (int. 15).

This second group originates in three different streams. First, there is a set of traditional big international philanthropic organizations and foundations such as the Rotary Club, the Red Cross or the Lion’s Club. They tend to have a long tradition in the country, starting their work in Nicaragua as offshoots of other countries during the dictatorship in the 1970s or the following Sandinista revolution. Their motivation is philanthropic, to help those in need in times of struggle and war or to support the poor population and specific disadvantaged groups. Next to that, there is a set of national (and international) NGOs which multiplied in the context of the general civil society boom during the 1990s and beyond (int. 4, int. 15). They are the first and principal recipients of foreign money, due to their official legal status (as association, international NGO or foundation), their internal organization, capacity, and transparency (int. 4, int. 32). Moreover, third, there is a set of more recently founded Nicaraguan foundations with close ties to national enterprises. The growing economic sector in Nicaragua has recently begun to foster its proper foundations as part of its social responsibility and altruistic side (int. 15). Prominent examples
constitute amongst others the Fundación Zamora Terán founded in 2009 by the bank LaFise. It started with the project »one laptop per child« and pursues the mission to improve education levels in the country. Another prominent example are the foundations linked to the Grupo Pellas, one of the most successful enterprises in the country. Counting amongst these is the Foundation APROQUEN (The Burned Children Care Foundation) which provides additional health services to children beyond burn treatment (int. 4).

All of these organizations, despite their different evolutionary backgrounds, share some common characteristic features. First of all, the majority of them disposes of a legal personality as foundation or association which naturally goes along with a comparatively high degree of professionalization, administration and employed full-time staff. Besides, they stand out for their internationality, whether as offsets of international NGOs or foreign foundations or simply by employing many foreigners and their close contacts to foreign funding institutions. Given these conditions, these CSOs tend to be expert organizations (compared to representative or member-based organizations). Leaders are non-elected and dispose of little base in the broad population – if it is not for their direct contact over local projects, target groups in the communities or their function as intermediaries between foreign donors and smaller, informal community organizations (int. 32). Another characteristic feature of this second group of CSOs in Nicaragua is that they tend to restrict their work on very specific issues or problems they want to solve in particular working fields (e.g. children with cleft lips, cultural aspects, construction of houses, computers for children) in which they tend to dispose of professional expertise and long-term experience (int. 15, int. 21).

All in all, this second group of CSOs is a traditionally deep-seated part of the CSO sector in Nicaragua that disposes of good visibility and presence (int. 15). However, its resources and strength highly depend on the money flows from external donors and the general state of international cooperation to Nicaragua.

7.1.3 Party-loyal CSOs

»These are organizations that are designed and organized by the government in power, the central government. Their agenda is completely oriented towards the support and the execution of work in the interest of the government’s political project. This practically is their configuration. Thus, these are organizations that
7. The sector

somehow do have political influence, in the sense that they convert into transmission belts of the government’s orientations and programs, right.« (Int. 15)

The third group of organizations can be characterized by its deep historical and ideological linkage with the presently governing Sandinista party. It includes many CSOs created by the Sandinista government during the Revolution in the 1980s which have survived until today and received new impetus with President Ortega’s return to power in 2007 (int. 16). In addition to that, there are others that driven by the government’s attempt to control the sector have successfully been co-opted or aligned to the party if not recently been created with top-down support. The interviewed experts tend to describe these organizations as party-loyal CSOs (int. 15, int. 2).

A first example constitutes those organizations gathered under the Coordinadora Social, a networking authority founded as a counterpart to the Coordinadora Civil. It includes traditional Sandinista unions such as ATC, ANDEN, CST or FEDSALUD that were founded before or during the Revolution and have experienced resurgence since the FSLN’s return to power in 2007 (int. 16). Another well-known actor is the Movimiento Comunal, an organization that had its height during the Revolution but still disposes of a solid regional presence (int. 16). Counting amongst these most prominent organizations is also AMNLAE, the country’s oldest women’s organization. AMNLAE played an active part in the women’s integration into the Revolution and emancipation in the 1980s and since then struggles between its deep rootedness in the Sandinista party and its strive for autonomy. In addition to that, a second subgroup of organizations comprises those recently installed by the government as a new form of citizen participation, namely the CPCs (or gabinetes de familia). While their status as civil society is controversial, these play a significant role in the execution of social programs and service provision in the rural areas. Moreover, the party-loyal CSOs embrace other local and less prominent or visible organizations active throughout the country that stand out for their traditional or recently gained linkage to the Sandinista party. They dispose of strong regional and cross-class representation and they are present in all working fields and deal with a broad range of thematic issues including local coffee cooperatives as well as student organizations or environmental groups.

Taken together, this third group of CSOs has turned into a flourishing sector since President Ortega’s return to government – at least in quantitative terms. Although their practical power is controversial, they are steadily increasing in number, visibility, and popularity.
7.2 Comparison of CSOs and their narratives

This chapter aims at deepening the insights into the three groups of Nicaraguan CSOs introduced in the preceding chapter. The findings are based on the interviews conducted with CSO leaders from three respective samples of organizations in the second part of the field study. The central categories of analysis concerned the members and their motivation, their concept of civil society, their agenda and objectives as organizations, their perception of challenges, and their positioning in the present political context. To carve out the idiosyncratic features of each sample of CSOs, findings are presented in a comparative perspective.

Figure 5: Categories of analysis

Source: Author

7.2.1 Short description of samples

Based on the findings from the background study and experts’ concrete recommendations, three samples of CSOs could be selected. Each sample correlates with one of the three groups introduced in the previous chapter and comprised 3-6 organizations. Interviews were conducted with their leaders and additional material collected for background information on the organizations’ history, self-presentation and agenda.

7.2.1.1 Sample A (critical CSOs)

Four interviews were conducted with leaders of organizations of sample A. All of the selected organizations once emerged from different social
movements of the 1980s and now focus on particular issues in the broader field of democracy promotion and participation.

Organization 1 is a broad and diverse umbrella organization of CSOs founded in the 1990s. It does not dispose of a legal personality which its members call a »political decision against a rigid administrative structure« (int. 8) to preserve their character as a social, civic and political movement. The organization presents itself as »a space for articulation, a platform for the construction of citizenship to incite in public policies« (int. 8). Their objective is twofold, on the one hand, they envisage the defense and promotion of human rights, particularly those of women, youth, and natives. On the other, they aim to impulse citizen participation in Nicaragua in general.

Organization 2 describes itself as an independent feminist movement organization with the goal to »strengthen the construction of citizenship of women, which means their political participation in all areas« (int. 24). Their objective is to »fight for equality and democracy from a feminist perspective« (int. 24). They do not dispose of a legal status either.

Organization 3 is a human rights NGO founded in 1990 which summarizes its agenda as to »defend human rights in a holistic manner, that is, not only civic and political rights but as well the economic, social and cultural rights« (int. 30).

Organization 4 sees itself as the head of a movement that pursues the goal to »promote, strengthen and defend democracy, liberty and the well-being of the Nicaraguan people with broad citizen participation« (int. 11). Their application for a legal personality has failed so far, but they are able to receive funding from external donors through an affiliated foundation.

All four CSOs were open to provide information about their members, objectives and difficulties and eager to share their views on the context of civic organization in Nicaragua.

7.2.1.2 Sample B (de-political CSOs)

Three organizations were interviewed from the second group of CSOs, all NGOs with different historical and international backgrounds and active in various working fields. All of them dispose of a legal status and they are funded primarily by international donors while one of them also lists national enterprises as an important funding source.

Organization 1 is a Nicaraguan offshoot of an international NGO working in Nicaragua since the 2000s. Its focus is on poverty reduction and the
development of rural communities, their principal objective is to »seek to overcome the situation in which thousands of persons live« in Nicaragua (int. 29). To do so, the organization brings together volunteers and local communities to collectively construct houses for the most disadvantaged and poor.

Organization 2 is a national NGO founded in the 1980s which seeks to improve services, access, and knowledge on health issues in Nicaragua. Their idea is to raise the health levels of the Nicaraguan population by fostering the promotion of rights and education in the field of health. With its expertise and professional employees it organizes workshops to capacitate medical personal or so-called »health brigadists« in the communities, develops information campaigns on topics such as HIV or dengue fever and executes studies on health issues.

Organization 3 is a national NGO founded quite recently which sees itself as a support group for women who suffered sexual abuse in their childhood. Their work splits into two main areas; the practical organization of self-help groups and the offer of psychological attention to women; and, second, their more profound objective to break the silence on the problems and reasons for sexual abuse of women in Nicaragua and to create a conscience for its criminal liability.

All three organizations work with a body of professional staff, they were open to provide information on their agenda and activities but proved rather reluctant to comment on the overall political context in Nicaragua.

7.2.1.3 Sample C (party-loyal CSOs)

Six interviews were conducted with organizations from the third sample, including three unions, one women’s organization, one NGO active in the field of rural development, and one CPC.

Organizations 1-3 are Nicaraguan unions working in the areas of education, agriculture, and employees. They were founded shortly before or during the Revolution with close ties to the Sandinista party and, by that time, played a significant role in the organization and mobilization of Nicaraguan society. Today they state to fight for the particular rights and the improvement of working conditions for their members, but as well strive to enhance the general development in their specific sectors.

Organization 4 is a traditional Nicaraguan women’s organization which had its height during the Revolution and possesses a legal status as NGO since 1990. It describes itself as a broad, pluralist, democratic, and auton-
omous national movement that strives for equal rights and opportunities for women and men in the sphere of the family, the state, and society.

Organization 5 is a Nicaraguan NGO founded in 1990 and working in the field of rural development. It carries out investigation and provides expertise to help rural workers with the aim to free them from dependency and poverty.

Organization 6 is a CPC from Managua’s suburbs. Its members present themselves as a »group of people who work for society« (int. 22) and see themselves as an intermediary between the government and its citizens. They seek to identify the needs and problems of the population at the local level and to communicate them to the government.

Several leaders of this sample knew each other and seemed to be interlinked. The organizations at first proved most difficult to contact and convince to agree to provide information. However, in the end, the interviews were equally open and informative as those of the other samples.

7.2.2 Members and their motivation

A first category of analysis in the evaluation of the three samples of CSOs concerned their members and their motivation to engage in the respective organization. The findings point to the different endeavors and incentives that drive the leaders’ engagement in the three groups.

7.2.2.1 Sample A: Engagement as a way of life

»I think that these fights, that Nicaragua … that those of us who believe in it have to be persistent and understand that these cultural changes don’t happen overnight, nor are they linear processes. Sometimes we progress, sometimes we regress. I believe in it and this belief keeps me holding on. Maybe I will not live to see what I’d like to see, but my motivation is to contribute my mite. And that’s why I form part of this movement, and I do this because I really believe that we have to do it.« (Int. 11)

The interviewees of this first sample of CSOs are all academics and belong to the tiny middle class and with that to the societal elite in Nicaragua. All of them are volunteers at least part-time. Three of them are former FSLN members who actively participated in the Revolution during the 1980s but presently are disappointed and have lost their faith in the FSLN party. They tend to describe themselves as »Sandinistas pero no Orteguistas« (Sandinistas but not partisans of President Ortega) – referring to.
their disapproval of the current government which they see as a betrayer of the original idea of Sandinism. The fourth one is a liberal-conservative aiming at promoting liberties and free market democracy. Together they are united in their criticism of the present government which they perceive as reactionary, autocratic and obstructive for Nicaragua’s future development and democratic consolidation.

The interviewees present their personal motivation to engage in their organization as the wish to promote and contribute to societal and political change in Nicaragua. To their minds, this includes a fundamental shift in the regime which they see at a crossroads between a regression to autocracy and a possible democratic future (int. 24). Due to their critical attitudes and their engagement, all of them have experienced discrimination and threats but emphasize that they are willing to take these risks. They rather tend to see every aggression and the permanent obstruction of their work by authorities as a proof of their organizations’ influence and power (int. 8, int. 30).

A common characteristic is that the interviewees of this sample are drawing only blurring boundaries between their engagement and work for their organization and their personal life. They see their commitment as part of a naturally difficult, life-long and indispensable pursuit of political change and improvement. This is illustrated as well in the previous quote of a representative who describes how she hopes to be able to »contribute her mite« (int. 11) to a more promising and prospering future for Nicaragua.

Altogether the interviewees of sample A present their effort and engagement in their respective organizations as a kind of philosophy or »way of life« (int. 30) for which they are naturally willing to offer much personal motivation and compromise.

7.2.2.2 Sample B: Engagement between profession and vocation

»My idea was to initiate this and to go back to my country after six months, to give an impetus, and the rest is done by the women. But then it turned out that the women naturally reached their emotional limits quite fast – and then they proposed or asked whether I could come back to accompany their work.« (Int. 31)

The private backgrounds of the second group of interviewees are quite international as two of the interviewees have European roots. The leaders are highly educated people and professionals in their working field; all of
them are full-time employed in their organization and belong to Nicaragua’s tiny middle class.

The organizations of sample B present a predominantly developmental perspective on Nicaragua. They describe the country and its people as poor and underdeveloped if not reactionary and, hence, in urgent need of support (int. 29, int. 31). The leaders highlight their wish to help and offer their knowledge and experience to people in need and contribute to the country’s socio-economic and cultural development. In this context, they sometimes display a perspective of superiority and patronization. Altogether, their motivation to engage in their organizations is clearly marked by the official development aid discourses and the idea of helping. The interviewees are willing to offer their energy, expertise and experience to their beloved country, no matter if they are Nicaraguans or foreigners. At the same time, however, they are always struggling to keep their professional distance to target groups, projects, and resource-related constraints as they have to bear in mind their organizations’ success and working capacity (int. 29, int. 31).

All in all, the personal motivations of the leaders of sample B seem to resemble in the wish to provide help and expertise to a country and its population in need. Moreover, they strive for the success of their organizations – which offer them the possibility to combine profession and vocation.

7.2.2.3 Sample C: Advocates for the poor

»I’m part of the people, I live in this neighborhood, I want to live here, I feel happy in this neighborhood, I feel safe here and I know how my people suffer. This is why I have to work in this union, together with my government to bring forward this country.« (Int. 19)

The interviewees of the third sample are all loyal partisans of the Sandinista government, whether party members or not. This includes older leaders who share a historical connection to the Sandinista Revolution and are connected to their party over posts and history as well younger members who belong to a new generation of Sandinista youth. The union leaders tend to have been exempted from their original jobs by the government in order to lead their organizations. Leaders from organization 4 and 5 are employed professionals while the CPC leader is a volunteer. Some of them are or were delegates in the National Parliament and state to have close ties to President Ortega himself.

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The organizations tend to present themselves as down-to-earth and close to the broad population. Their leaders see themselves as representatives of their people and regard their work or engagement as a consequent translation of their wish to bring forward their country (int. 19, int. 26). They admit that Nicaragua is suffering major socio-economic problems and that there are still opportunities for improvement. Nonetheless, they coincide in their view that they will achieve their goals best under the current government which they highlight as »government of the people« (int. 19, int. 22). Remarkable is the leaders’ strong identification with the President and its policies, expressed in their constant recurrence to Daniel Ortega as a leader, idol, and friend. Their loyalty shines through in all the interviews, by direct reference as well as word choice. One interviewee, for example, concludes a description of the country’s progress in the last years by stating »this is what our boss does, this is what our President does, what our companion Daniel does« (int. 19).

At the same time, all of the interviewees strictly dismiss the possibility of benefits or ambiguities resulting from the blurring boundaries between party membership and engagement in their organizations. At the end of the interview only one of them lets his hopes for promotion within the party and personal advantages shine through, when he expresses his hope that he might eventually be promoted and get a better paid post for his year-long voluntary work (int. 22).

Altogether, the motivation presented by the interviewees of sample C can be summarized as that of acting as advocates for the poor. All of them seem to be ideologically motivated and share the same vision of their country as currently experiencing big transformations which promise to resolve its historical problems of poverty and inequality.

### 7.2.3 Their concept of civil society

A second category of interest in the interviews with CSO leaders referred to their concept of civil society and their self-presentation as organizations. The findings highlight the differences in their attitudes, perceptions and the use of an apparently highly controversial and politicized term in Nicaragua.
7.2.3.1 Sample A: Civil society as civic resistance against authority

»We belong to a particular sector of civil society, we who call ourselves autonomous. We are autonomous from political parties, autonomous from governments, autonomous from the big private enterprises, autonomous from religious ideologies and autonomous from international cooperation. And because of this autonomy, we don’t have any resources.« (Int. 8)

The interviewed CSO leaders of sample A use the term civil society in a highly politicized and emotionally charged way. Thus, the question for the concept and its use in Nicaragua tended to release lively discussions in the interviews.

Starting point for all of the interviewees in this sample is their strong self-identification with the concept that results in claims of authority and the attempt of differentiation from other parts of the sector. Their understanding is based on their proper perception as representing the only real and genuine civil society in Nicaragua (int. 8). The organizations make a point of their autonomy and independence from particular interests. Thereby, they try to distance themselves from other types of organizations and self-nominate their group as that of »autonomous« CSOs (int. 8, int. 24). As in the quote above, they emphasize their independence from the government, all types of economic interests and influences of international cooperation. As a result, they state to have little support and major problems to get funding even by international donors (int. 8). Also, they distance themselves sharply from other parts of the sector which they perceive as dependent and monitored by party-political or third interests. These include organizations close to the governmental party which they do not consider as real civil society as well as those organizations which assimilate too much to the interests and requirements of external donors and international cooperation. According to the interviewees, the supposed neutrality and hiding behind uncontroversial and less political issues of many CSOs in the present context is untenable and results in new dependencies and conflicts (int. 8, int. 11). A leader complains:

»There are organizations that have arranged themselves and which probably do not face these challenges as clearly, because these are organizations that work on social topics, construct communities, health issues etc. that do not directly clash … But we as organizations that have a broader vision and work on the issues of governance and democracy, we are facing enormous challenges, particularly since 2007.« (Int. 11)

A second common characteristic is that the interviewees in this sample present civil society as a synonym for pluralism, diversity and hope for democratization. They use the term as a political slogan and as an expres-
sion of civic resistance against authorities. Against this background, they identify and measure CSOs by their willingness and capacity to challenge authorities and shape the political process. Against this background, the leaders tend to emphasize the crucial role of CSOs in the democratization of the country from past till present. Starting with their contribution to the Revolution and finding a first peak during the boom in the 1990s, they remember them as a symbol of pluralism, diversity, and participation in the newly emerging democracy. CSOs turned into a platform for discussion and understanding and, hence, had a crucial share in overcoming political polarization and the development of a long-term strategy for the country. In a retrospective, this era is characterized as flourishing and most conducive to civic engagement (int. 11, int. 24).

Furthermore, third, this sample of CSOs presents civil society as the last hope to promote democratization and progress in the given context in Nicaragua – and highlights its resulting vulnerability and repression through state authorities. Although CSOs in Nicaragua are described as an actor who always faced repression by governments, they emphasize that this opportunity has been particularly under pressure since President Ortega’s return to power (int. 11, 30). Against this background, the interviewees highlight the unequal nature of the fight between CSOs and the country’s overly autocratic authorities. They perceive the current struggles as resembling those of David against Goliath, as to their mind civil society in Nicaragua »is fighting against a monster« (int. 8).

Altogether, the CSO leaders of sample A present the term civil society as a political slogan and battle word that stands for their idea of civic resistance against all kinds of authority and, not least, for the hope for a plural and democratic society.

7.2.3.2 Sample B: Civil society as a technical term

The central finding concerning the prevailing concept of civil society in the interviews with leaders of sample B is that the idea and interpretation of civil society in Nicaragua did not emerge as a major topic in any of them.

Asked for the term and its usage, the interviewees showed rather little identification with the concept. They consider themselves as part of the civil society sector but without further dwelling on any conceptual or ideological debate. Rather, they seemed to avoid every discussion of the concept and its controversy in Nicaragua. While one can assume that they
know about the ongoing politicization and debate about the term, a proper denomination and positioning for them seemed to be of minor importance or at least not promising in the given context. The interviewees tend to define their organizations not by a certain group membership but as independent actors that provide expertise and services in their particular working fields. Tying in with discourses in the field of developmental aid, they aim at identifying and helping their particular target groups, write proposals and set up projects in order to construct a better country. They seem to seek their coalitions and networks by thematic field, lay emphasis on efficiency and professionalism while disregarding any ideological or political attitudes. Accordingly, the principal focus and attention of the leaders throughout the interviews concerns the presentation of their organizations’ particular agenda, successful projects, and future plans (int. 28, int. 29, int. 31).

Against this background, the concept of civil society prevalent in this second sample of CSOs can be described as rather factual and technical, denoting a specific type of societal organization. The interviewees use the term in a less ideological and not least cautious way and show little identification with the concept.

7.2.3.3 Sample C: Civil society as a »modus vivendi« for neoliberals

»It’s a capricious creation, a creation of the Europeans who came here to say ‘the governments are bad and the political parties are bad’. This is where the contradiction, the intrigue, the deceit of the concept comes from. Europe and the neoliberal ideas, they want to eliminate the state, that’s why they created NGOs. In Latin America, in the third world … they left about fifty thousand NGOs in Latin America, paid by the money of European contributors, to criticize political parties and governments, to say that they are bad and that’s why they have to be privatized. (…) Hence, they build up some NGOs to carry out their private work. The concept of civil society that is used here is an instrument by the Europeans to privatize the state.« (Int. 20)

The organizations of sample C present the most skeptical attitude towards the concept of civil society. The interviewees completely reject the term which they perceive as highly controversial, politicized and misused. They coincide in their anger about the concept’s exploitation and misuse in Nicaragua and hold up their proper value as genuine »social organizations« instead.

In line with the government’s discourse, the leaders of sample C claim that the original concept of civil society has been exploited by neoliberal
forces in the form of international donors and oppositional actors in Nicaragua. They accuse these of strategically misusing the concept by misleadingly equating it with being in opposition to the state and in order to support organizations which question and obstruct the Nicaraguan governments (int. 20). One interviewee summarizes this skepticism in the allegation that the so-called first world has (mis-) used the idea of civil society – which has traditionally been associated with civility and opposition to violence and authority – to subordinate and disempower so-called third world national states (int. 20).

A second finding from the interviews is that this sample tends to regard NGOs as a personification of the exploited but predominant civil society concept in Nicaragua. NGOs are perceived as a small group of intellectuals and wealthy citizens, supported by foreign powers and international organisms which try to obstruct and weaken the Nicaraguan government (int. 17, int. 20). The interviewees criticize them as a »modus vivendi« (int. 22, int. 19) for their employees who profit from the »roaring trade« (int. 22) with international donors who provide them with high salaries and other privileges. They criticize NGOs as dissembling and hypocritical actors that strive for profit and fame with falsified reports and calculations and spend most of their time just gaining resources for their status quo instead of effectively helping the Nicaraguan population (int. 22, int. 19, int. 20). The interviewees tend to base their accusations on their bad experiences in the past where they perceived NGOs as a personification of the neoliberal politics starting in the 1990s that increased poverty and inequality in Nicaragua (int. 20).

»Civil society is ... and was a channel for resources, a manager of resources. They came here and sold a project to diagnose poverty in X municipalities. And they went to the consultants and gave them thousands of dollars to carry out their diagnoses. And to the poor? 10% of it remained for the poor. This is the type of civil society that we had in Nicaragua, and this is the type of civil society that the political right wants to promote here in this country. And this is why we disagree.«

(Int. 19)

A further characteristic of the interviews is that all of the leaders equally reject any accusations of repression against CSOs in Nicaragua, relegating to the – to their mind – flourishing landscape of CSOs in the country. They emphasize that if the other parts of the sector stopped their resistance and permanent obstruction of the government and its policies, the government would also appreciate their work and be much more approachable for them (int. 22, int. 19). Against this background, it becomes evident that the CSOs of sample C feel excluded and stigmatized just because they de-
fend the present Nicaraguan government’s policies – and, hence, perceive the concept of civil society as highly exclusive and discriminatory (int. 26, int. 19). The interviewees themselves assert their claims to represent the real and genuine civil society, stating that “the people are civil society, not the organizations” (int. 19). They differentiate themselves from the other groups by underlining their true connection to the population and presenting themselves as a grass-roots movement, responsive to the people and with representation in all municipalities (int. 17). They emphasize that they do not work with trendy topics or projects sponsored by external donors, but try to cooperate with the government to bring forward their country (int. 17, int. 25).

Altogether the interviews suggest that the conception of civil society in this third sample of organizations strongly connects to that presented by the Ortega government. The leaders reject the term as misused and deprived of its authentic meaning and uphold their own understanding of civic organization – centering on popular mobilization for the sake of the country.

7.2.4 Their agenda and meta-objectives

A further important issue in the analysis of the three samples of CSOs concerned their broader agenda for the country. The findings contrast the different day-to-day activities, strategies, and objectives that underlie and guide the organizations’ work.

7.2.4.1 Sample A: The broader struggle for democracy

“We will always oppose this autocratic, patriarchic model and this macho perspective in society, because as it is anchored in the population, it is anchored in the political culture as well. Therefore, it is a battle at different levels that we have to fight. The everyday fights, the fight against domestic violence, the work to promote women’s rights. But on the other side, there also is the other battle, the big struggle for the restoration of democracy that entails all our efforts to articulate the democratic powers. And this naturally includes the influence of feminism, to make this democracy become inclusive, for the women, to make it progressive.” (Int. 24)

The CSOs of sample A differ in their financial and technical facilities and their day-to-day activities. A common characteristic, however, is their deliberate political agenda and their focus on advocacy and lobbying.
The analyzed CSOs work in the areas of women’s rights, human rights, and citizen participation, issues that almost necessarily imply a critical discussion and involvement in the political sphere. They include the ambition to raise awareness about discrimination and human rights’ abuse and to create consciousness for the rights and duties of active citizenship among the population. Also, they implicate the attempt to change general political and societal structures and the legal framework in support of their particular target groups and objectives.

Next to that, the political character of their agenda is intensified as all of these organizations seem to connect their endeavor for their specific target groups – women, victims of human rights abuse, voters etc. – with the broader claim for civil and political liberties. This meta-agenda becomes visible for example in the quote above where an interviewee describes their work as a battle at different levels. On the one hand, the anchorage of women’s rights and gender equality among the population and the day-to-day fight against domestic violence. On the other, the bigger struggle for the restoration, preservation and further development of democratic structures. All of the organizations understand themselves as part of a constant fight for the implementation and proliferation of democratic values in Nicaragua. Moreover, they tend to highlight the interdependence between their struggles as CSOs and the general regime structures. While their agenda is headed at democratic change, the present prevailing autocratic legacies and socio-economic obstacles obstruct their daily work and endanger their survival as organizations.

Against this background, a common strategy of the CSOs of sample A in order to achieve their goals is that of activism and protest. It implies the organization of manifestations, protest marches and boycott – whether in favor of a new law on gender equality, the disbursement of pensions for retired people, or against election irregularities and corruption. They see this kind of activities in the form of taking to the streets as an important option to maintain their influence in politics, particularly as the institutional context does not allow the interference of third actors and excludes them from official participation and hearings. Also, they see their fight as an answer to the increasing mobilization of party-loyal masses by the government. An interviewee summarizes:

»This is why we promote political mobilization. Because in Nicaragua, with this current regime that is totally authoritarian, dictatorial – in this context it’s not a military dictatorship but let’s say a political dictatorship that lets the democratic system collapse. This is why we promote all this political, civic mobilization, to defend our rights.« (Int. 24)
However, all interviewees point out that mobilization and protest are extremely challenging and dangerous in the present context and that they had to reduce these activities in the last years to protect their members from governmental arbitrariness and revenge.

A second undertaking mentioned by the leaders of sample A is the denunciation of existing malpractices and inequalities and the assistance to victims. This field becomes of particular importance in the present context of weak democratic institutions and a biased media. Against this background, the CSOs of sample A organize information events and discussions, publish and document their work but as well support citizens legally, financially, and emotionally to defend their rights. In times of repression and restricted spaces for protest and civic mobilization, they tend to consider civil society’s endeavor to denounce and uncover existing malpractices or inequalities and their fight for the victims to be even more important (int. 11, int. 30).

Finally, a third issue on the agenda of sample A is that of long-term and strategic education. The basic idea is to educate the population and support their knowledge of their rights and duties as Nicaraguan citizens and human beings in general (int. 30). The focus may be on the emancipation and liberation of women, the universality of human rights, the promotion of citizenship or the importance of participation for democracy. In this context, the leaders list the organization of workshops on topics such as leadership for the youth, feminist formation, the production of education material on human rights or conflict solution, the organization of public debates as well as the formation of denominated »human rights promoters« (int. 24, int. 30, int. 11). The reason for this third focus lies in their leaders’ skepticism concerning the internalization of democratic values and culture within the population. All of the interviewees emphasize that the drawbacks in the political and socio-economic spheres cannot be analyzed and resolved apart from society and the broad population:

> Because we are convinced that a democratic system requires all the, let’s say traditional characteristics; separation of powers, rule of law, etc. But there is an element that we think is fundamental, and it’s the political culture of the population (…). Because we always say that the politicians neither come from Venus nor Mars, they are products of our proper society. And that we won’t have democratic governments as long as we don’t commit ourselves to the democratic values and principles – from an integral perspective, political, social and economic democracy.« (Int. 11)

Taken together, the organizations of sample A seem to direct their activities at two different levels. On the one side, the need to transform the values and habits of the general population. On the other, the rescue or con-
solidation of democratic institutional structures. In the face of increasing governmental pressure, there seems to be a trend towards less mobilization, advocacy and lobbying and, in turn, a concentration on denouncing malpractices and educating the population. In other words, a change from street activism, protest, and political incidence to raising awareness in society. At the same time, the work of the organizations of sample A seems to ground in a common evaluation of the country’s most urgent problems. More precisely, its hybrid democratic structures and, in particular, the current autocratic tendencies of the Ortega government. This context inspires their broader agenda and their attempt to integrate their specific activities within the country’s broader struggle for democracy.

7.2.4.2 Sample B: Structural societal and economic change

»And in these working sessions, what we want to do is not to make ourselves protagonists of … but that the very community becomes the protagonist and they themselves contribute with their ideas, discuss their projects, execute all these activities. Because they know what they need as a community to advance, and we as organization rather accompany, right, offer equipment and advice with the experience that we have from our work as organization. Because what we want to achieve are self-sustaining communities, that someday they don’t need us anymore but that they manage themselves and execute all the projects that they want to carry out. To organize themselves, because organized they can achieve much more and bring forward their community.« (Int. 29)

All three organizations of sample B present an explicit social agenda focusing on the (long term) socio-economic development of the country and the empowerment of the population. Their activities concern the work with vulnerable groups in rural communities, the assistance to abused women and the promotion of education in the field of health. The leaders present their agenda and objectives restricted to the support of their specific focus groups, their particular needs, and struggles.

The agenda described by the interviewees of sample B tends to be two-fold. It includes the provision of services and emergency assistance to their target groups as well as the attempt to raise general awareness of the deficiencies in their particular working fields amongst the political elite and society at large.

The first set of activities can be summarized as such aiming to assist and empower their specific target groups. They include the provision of emergency assistance to people in need, whether in the form of reconstructing local communities, psychological attendance to abused women
or consulting and mentoring of ill people. However, the interviewees tend to emphasize that their focus lies on the idea of long-term empowerment and education to help people to help themselves. By the provision of workshops and education on specific topics, the organization of self-help groups, and general education on self-organization and citizens’ rights and duties they want to make them independent of outside help. Moreover, they wish to activate the citizens to take their fate into their own hands (int. 31, int. 29, int. 28). For example, one organization works with young volunteers to create social conscience among the youth and deepen their knowledge of their country and other social strata:

»Because we particularly want to reach all the youth, we want to create a social conscience in them. We think that our organization serves as a school of leadership where the kids have the opportunity to come and apply the things that they’ve studied, or to become aware of the actual reality in their country. Thus we also want to encourage that, to have critical volunteers that participate, that get involved in different activities, not only in our organization but in general activities, that they seek change, seek progress for the country, right.« (Int. 29)

All organizations emphasize that their work goes beyond mere service provision and ad-hoc assistance. In order to bring about real change in society and reach a long-term success they require participation and personal engagement of their target groups:

»And it’s to empower them, too. To make them feel that they worked and devoted themselves, exactly. And that nobody just came and gave it to them, for instance.« (Int. 29)

A second set of activities outlined and carried out by the organizations can be summarized as evaluating and providing information on the country’s poverty and general problems. The organizations use their expertise to collect data and execute and publish studies on specific issues. Based on this, they execute activities that raise awareness of the drawbacks and challenges specific to their working fields and particularly affecting their target groups. These activities are directed to the broad Nicaraguan population as well as to the country’s political elites and the international community – to make the government and international actors assume their responsibilities (int. 28, int. 29). One leader highlights that one of their objectives is to raise public attention for poverty and »set the topic on the agenda« (int. 29). Also, the interviewees mention the provision of training courses for psychologists and cooperation with universities as well as information exchange and workshops offered to other organizations as part of their agenda (int. 31).
Against this background, the central agenda of the CSOs of sample B seems to embrace the promotion of structural societal and economic change in Nicaragua. In order to do so, they count on the empowerment of the population, principally by the provision of services and expertise in their specific working fields and restricted to their particular target groups.

7.2.4.3 Sample C: Empowering the poor

»We have to develop the economy of our country, to lift the Nicaraguans out of this poverty and out of this unemployment. If somebody doesn’t have the chance to eat three times a day, he or she is extremely poor. Hence, we say, in our plan, that we need to continue organizing the workers, strengthen their organization, negotiate collective agreements, and improve the salaries.« (Int. 19)

The objectives of the CSOs of sample C vary according to the organizations’ specific working fields, for instance from improving the education system over increasing the salaries of a particular target group to the empowerment of women. However, common denominators in the interviews are, first of all, their emphasis on the fight against poverty and inequality. Second, the heading for a radical, long-term transformation of society which is underlined by a praise of the current Sandinista government. Furthermore, last, their emphasis on the consequent necessity to mobilize and organize society for the sake of the country.

The interviewees coincide in their fight against inequality and poverty, for redistribution and sustainability. Their principal objective seems to be to improve the living circumstances of the most vulnerable and poor. In order to achieve that, they recur to different means and activities. These include the provision of proper services and information, for instance via the building up and maintenance of women’s houses or educational facilities (int. 25), the execution of social programs of the government such as Hambre Zero or serving as an intermediary in the selection and distribution process and as information centers and contact points for citizens (int. 19, int. 22). Their activities, however, often trespass mere service provision and are meant to empower and inform their vulnerable target groups to stand in for their rights and take charge of their lives. At the heart of their claims lies the abolishment of poverty and historical inequalities.

However, another characteristic feature is their will to integrate their particular agenda into a bigger picture, as they see their work as part of a radical and long-term transformation of society. In this context, the leaders of sample C present their particular work as only part of more general ob-
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Objectives such as the improvement of living circumstances and poverty levels in the country, inequality and not least the idea to revolutionize the whole capitalist economic system (int. 19). One interviewee summarizes their endeavor:

»We share a vision of a transformation of the economic model. We are satisfied that we now have a new collective agreement, this is good. But it’s not the core of our strategy. We want a change of the model, the introduction of a model that satisfies the entire society, that solves the problem of poverty, that resolves the issue of unemployment. (…) This capitalist model does not resolve that, right. And this is why we have to construct an economic model with equality, equity, with sustainability, with gender equity, between men and women.« (Int. 19)

Besides, a further common feature in this context is the leaders’ expression of gratitude and appreciation towards the current government. Throughout the interviews, it becomes evident that the CSO leaders of this sample see the present political conditions as conducive to the implementation of their agenda – especially in comparison to the former neoliberal governments. The interviewees tend to accompany the description of their agenda with a praise of the government and its achievements so far. A recurrent motive is the return of the Revolution as promoted by the Ortega government which serves as leitmotif and legitimation source and builds the background of their work:

»We are right now in the process of a social transformation, a revolution that now lasts six years already in the second term of the government. And this enables and facilitates our relation and communication with the institutions.« (Int. 26)

Against this background, one important step in the aim for societal transformation is the organization and mobilization of the population. The necessity to organize and win the people is a recurring topic in all of the interviews. The organizations aim at strengthening the population’s participation in events, their party affiliation and making people get engaged to bring forward their country.

Altogether, the interviewees of Sample C present their organizations’ agenda as part of a concerted effort to radically transform Nicaraguan society by empowering and supporting the poor. In line with the Nicaraguan government, they frame this process as a continuation of the Sandinista Revolution.
7.2.5 Perception of challenges

Another category of analysis in the interviews with CSO leaders concerned the obstacles they face in their daily work. The findings illustrate how differently the three groups of organizations perceive and evaluate the present context for civic organization in Nicaragua.

7.2.5.1 Sample A: State repression and lack of support in an increasingly conflictive context

»And during these last six years, let’s say since 2007, the autonomous CSOs had to face a series of obstacles, right. And I think the most important challenge has been the need to defeat the fear. The fear to confront, to speak out the things as they are and to face the consequences.« (Int. 11)

Asked about the obstacles they face, the organizations of sample A unanimously name the repression by the Nicaraguan governments and the withdrawal and lack of support by international donors.

The interviewees describe the most salient challenge as that of persecution and discrimination by the current and past governments. Their principal argument is that particularly the Ortega government from its beginnings has made clear that it classifies as enemies all CSOs that it perceives as critical or oppositional to any of its policies. Since then, it tries to destruct the selected organizations with repression and the restriction of funding from international donors as already outlined in chapter 6 (int. 11). Against this background, one major challenge for the organizations of sample A is not to let themselves be intimidated but to continue striving for their agenda despite all attempts of intimidation and upcoming obstacles. As outlined before, the interviewees emphasize that they as self-nominated autonomous organizations that promote political change and do not refrain from criticizing the authorities, suffer most. In particular compared to those others rather involved in service delivery and less conflictive social issues (int. 8, int. 11, int. 24).

When asked for concrete examples of repression, the interviewees mention both administrative measures and direct persecution (similar to those listed in chapter 6.). These range from the fear to lose their office through bank intervention to police aggression in demonstrations and are targeted against organizations as well as against individual members (int. 6, int. 8). The interviewees particularly bemoan the intensification of conflicts with the current government which even outperforms that of the former con-
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servative-right governments. However, in a context of perceived autocratization, they consider these attacks on their organizations as a sign of success and relevance:

»The people here in Nicaragua believe in us, the best proofs are the levels of rejection and harassment, persecution of this government, which we did not have with the preceding governments. It’s incredible, with the so-called rightist governments, like that of Doña Violeta, that of Arnoldo Alemán which was so corrupt, and the one of Don Enrique, quite rightist … but we did not face this type of persecution. In contrast, with the revolutionary government, we indeed are subject of repression (...).« (Int. 30)

Apart from these obstacles they face through persecution and repression, the organizations also mention the attempt of cooptation and bribe as one major obstacle. This is perceived particularly by those organizations that were formerly close to the Sandinista party and understand themselves as being particularly qualified and entitled to evaluate the government’s successes:

»Yes, it’s been very difficult because particularly the FSLN attempts at co-opting our movement or to align it to its proper interests. Because this movement had an important role in the context of the Revolution, in everything that implied the participation of women in this context. And this gives us the authority and the right to criticize, to analyze the policies of this government and to question it concerning its presentation as a continuance of the People’s Sandinista Revolution.« (Int. 24)

The second major challenge mentioned by the interviewees of sample A concerns their relation to external donors and international cooperation. They bemoan their fickleness, their lack of solidarity and particularly their current withdrawal. The complex donor-recipient relationship is summarized by one interviewee as »the cancer of international support« (int. 11). All of the organizations in the past profited from international funding and now are struggling with donors’ withdrawal and lack of support. Their leaders particularly complain about the cowardice and biases of many donors. According to their mind, these prefer less controversial and non-political issues and negate cooperation with critical organizations. More precisely, they feel that donors stopped funding their work due to their fight for rights and democracy and their tackling of controversial issues – to avoid proper quarrels with the authorities (int. 8). All in all, the organizations of sample A perceive international cooperation as totally monitored and neutralized by the Nicaraguan government.

»It’s that in fact this regime is totally intimidating, for the citizens, but as well for international cooperation. Because in the attempt to control everything and subordinate everything to an autocratic model … this dimension includes everything. Hence international cooperation, or what is left of it, in order to continue working,
had to line-up and somehow was left neutralized in the face of the government’s power. Hence, in the end it has been completely conditioned. Although there is no official proof, in practice they say that since 2009 all access has been blocked for the opportunity to initiate everything related to the issues of democratic governance, particular rights, sexual and reproductive rights, for example, all these issues have been forbidden.« (Int. 24)

Against this background, the interviewees make clear that a second major challenge for the future for Nicaraguan CSOs will be to become more independent from foreign funding.

Taken together, the organizations of sample A think that the most significant obstacles they face are due to their struggle against existing regime structures and particularly their courage to question and criticize the current government.

Their attempt to incite politically by displaying drawbacks, questioning authorities, and standing up for the values of democracy leads not only to distrust and persecution by the government in power. It also meets with the refusal of many donors who negate to support their organizations and agenda either willingly or under pressure. Against this background, sample A perceives the general context as highly conflictive and repressive and not at all conducive to independent civic organization.

7.2.5.2 Sample B: Inter-organizational and structural socio-economic deficits

»So the attempt to grow ... and to reach more and more people, to reach more and more communities and to construct a higher number of homes or to manage bigger projects in the communities, this will always be one of the greatest challenges we face.« (Int. 29)

Asked for the principal obstacles they face as organizations in Nicaragua, the interviewees from sample B firstly mention intra-organizational challenges and the country’s enormous socio-economic deficits. Striking again is the only minor attention given to the political circumstances or possible conflictive relations with authorities.

The first interviewee for example classifies intra-organizational problems as their principal challenge, more precisely the high workload of their personnel and the urgent necessity to find a better balance between their mission and their actual capacities. As a small organization, their members frequently work overtime and their work requires much more resources and time than they actually have (int. 31). The interviewee states:
»Thus the biggest daily challenge is that we haven’t found a possibility to guarantee our self-care, all of us are at their limits due to the workload. This is let’s say the greatest challenge, we need more people to work in this organization.« (Int. 31)

As also illustrated in the quote above, the need to grow, to reach more people and to extend their work is mentioned as a major challenge for their organizations. Against this background, the interviewed leaders point out the problem of getting enough resources in the form of funding from international donors, particularly since these started to withdraw in 2008. A particular problem in this context is the difficulty to get institutional funding to secure the continuance of their work, to guarantee the salaries for their employees and develop long-term concepts and strategies (int. 31).

As a second challenge, the interviewees finally refer to different socio-economic legacies in Nicaragua, depending on their thematic focus. For instance, one organization cites machismo, patriarchy and the lack of knowledge and ignorance towards women’s rights as a principal challenge that makes their specific work as a women’s organization pioneer and difficult in Nicaragua (int. 31). Similarly, another CSO perceives the country’s economic weakness as the principal obstacle. More precisely, the widespread poverty in the country which means much work ahead for them as an organization:

»But to be honest, the principal challenge is the level of poverty that we have in Nicaragua. So to say it’s so big, it’s so much work and such a great challenge that we face … but we are convinced that it is possible to bring about change.« (Int. 29)

Against this background, the withdrawal of international cooperation is mentioned as a further challenge by the organizations of sample B. Some of them had to close part of their offices as the major Spanish donors withdrew and competition for remaining funding increased (int. 28). In this context, the interviewees express a strong criticism of international cooperation, criticizing not only their short-term orientation but as well their self-interest: »International cooperation does not work for the interests of others, it works for its proper interests« (int. 28).

All in all, three observations come to mind concerning the perception of challenges among sample B. First, the interviewees put much weight to intra-organizational challenges, i.e. the workload and organizational capacity. Particularly the difficulty in securing funding in times of increasing withdrawal from donors is a recurring issue in all of the interviews and shows the organizations’ dependency and linkage to the whole develop-
mental aid sector. Second, there is the importance attached to the country’s socio-cultural deficits and problems. The interviewees tend to dwell on rather socio-economic and cultural deficits or legacies such as the lack of education among the broad population, widespread machismo, poverty, and inequality. For the interviewees, the biggest challenges in their daily work are linked to Nicaragua’s status as a developing country and the historical scarcity of money, other resources, and education. Third, in each of the interviews there is little reference at all, if not an avoidance to refer to the political situation and the regime context, such as for example in the form of problems with the authorities. The interviewees all draw the attention to general social-economic problems while avoiding comments on the political sphere and Nicaragua’s regime structures. Likewise, the context does not seem to play a major role in the organizations’ workaday life. Only one organization admits that their work is much easier in the municipalities where the central government has less power (int. 28). Another interviewee in passing mentions the challenge to work without being influenced by the government – but on the inquiry of the interviewer states that this works out well in the end (int. 29).

All in all, for this group of organizations the biggest challenges seem to arise from the country’s lack of knowledge and capacities to address the deficiencies identified by CSOs.

7.2.5.3 Sample C: Overcoming the socio-economic legacies of the neoliberal past

»There’s freedom to do everything here, but what we lack are economic resources. The principal problem or obstacle that we face in our development is the access to economic resources. This is the principal limitation, economic resources.« (Int. 17)

The challenges described by the group of interviewees of sample C again differ regarding their specific working fields but resemble in their general line of attack. The CSO leaders principally cite rather technical issues closely linked to general economic deficits that are, in turn, attributed to the country’s neoliberal past.

The first characteristic in the answers of the interviewees is a strong dominance of concrete practical problems in their specific sector. Asked about the most significant challenges they face, the leaders mention the lack of access and knowledge of advanced technology or the lack of fund-
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ing for small producers or dwell on the deficiencies of the Nicaraguan educational system:

> Our major challenges have to do with the quality of education, right. Of course, it’s been six years since the government re-introduced the free access to educational services and eliminated the financial barriers introduced with the autonomy of schools or, let’s say, neoliberalism, but we cannot just content us with free education, we have to improve the whole education system, the quality of education. Hence this is the principal challenge for us, to promote a national education system that responds to the people, right, because we don’t think about the market, we think about the people. The education system has to refocus on its humanistic roots, this is the challenge, particularly after 17 years of destruction, right, that put individualism above survival, propagating that the social problems are of the people and not of society …» (Int. 26)

Another common feature is that the interviewees attribute these specific issues to the structural lack of economic resources. Each of the mentioned challenges centers in the country’s historical poverty. Besides, as already visible in the previous quote, the interviewees tend to relate these socio-economic problems to the neoliberal legacies of the past:

> After three neoliberal governments, we were left with 1.3 million unemployed Nicaraguans. And the number of those economically active was, is, about 2.3 million. More than 50, 60% of the population are out of work, and with a huge number of emigrants – this is what they inherited to us. So what did we say? – That we have to develop this country’s economy to lift these people out of poverty and unemployment.« (Int. 19)

A further common characteristic in the interviews with leaders of sample C is that apart from dwelling on these socio-economic challenges, they expressed their satisfaction with the current government and their gratefulness for its good work and commitment. In contrast to the other two samples of organizations, these CSOs perceive the current context as progressive and conducive to the country’s general social and political development. One interviewee summarizes:

> In the last six years with this, to my mind, very progressive government, several rights were restored, for example the right to education, health, some issues concerning credits. Thus we still lack support programs for the poorest families in the rural communities, because the government’s objective is the fight against poverty and in this we coincide. Thus a lot of people benefit from these programs of the present government, like the Bono Productivo, Usura Zero, programs that coincide with our interests in the countryside, where there are the poorest people. So here we participate, we see that in the last years they have improved the highways, the streets, public transport, there have been investments. They’ve improved electric energy – there were times when we had blackouts of up to 8, 10 hours. And all that has been resolved now, this is good for the country, for everyone.« (Int. 17)
In general, the organizations’ satisfaction with the present situation is only restricted by some remarks about »problemitas« (int. 25) related to political pressure. The interviewees tend to perceive and downplay these as absolutely normal and resolvable and only a slight criticism shines through. For example, one interviewee admits that there are difficulties but quickly expresses his view that they are much better off than under all of the preceding governments:

»We all have our differences, our viewpoints, and some even disagree with certain policies. But this obviously is a process of unity, it’s a process based on mutual understanding and it implies not being adverse towards everything. Here we have problems, we have difficulties, but they don’t present a rupture. And we believe that we have more opportunities with the Revolution than with the neoliberals, this is obvious.« (Int. 26)

Altogether, the interviewees of sample C when asked about the challenges they face, draw upon sector-related problems such as a lack of knowledge and equipment. They attribute these problems in turn to the widespread poverty in Nicaragua and the lack of resources resulting from the socio-economic legacies of the neoliberal years. On the whole, the general context is highlighted as overly conducive to civic organization as well as to the country’s general development.

7.2.6 Strategic positioning

The last category of analysis concerned the organizations’ strategic positioning in the present political context. The findings bring out the different profiles of the three groups of organizations and their varying degrees of contentment and embeddedness within the current regime structures.

7.2.6.1 Sample A: The last force able to promote democracy

»We have always been in the opposition, an opposition confronting all autocratic expression of power and manifestations and attacks of the patriarchy against the rights of women. But this implies to always be in contradiction to the state, to the previous governments, but with the FSLN it’s particular because the party with its non-democratic mentality wants to hegemonize everything and demonizes or destroy everything that they think is adverse to them.« (Int. 24)

The organizations of sample A strategically position themselves as democracy-promoting opposition to an increasingly autocratic government and last force able to save democracy. This attitude shines through in all of the
interviews and the above-treated aspects, whether in their leaders’ concept of civil society as an antagonist to authority, their ambition to incite into politics and bring about democratic change or in their perception of challenges.

All of the interviewees in this sample tend to connect their answers with a strong criticism of the present government and general regime structures. They present the current political situation as a »new style dictatorship« (int. 11) which outstrips all autocratic tendencies under the preceding governments. The Ortega government is presented as responsible for the deterioration of democratic structures which they promote as organizations and to which they want to return. A recurrent argument refers to the discrepancy between the formal democratic framework and the insufficient validity and implementation of democratic values in practice. The following quote is characteristic of the interviewees’ evaluation of the situation and their perception of the present context on which they ground their work:

»Nicaragua is a country that disposes of an excellent and revolutionary legal framework. But what happens? – it’s not in force. Our government is so autocratic, so secretive that it doesn’t provide information, it neither accounts for nor demands account for anything. So it’s a closed government, autocratic and the Constitution, the laws, the legal framework are meaningless. Here in Nicaragua they govern de facto, not de jure, de facto« (Int. 8)

Second, the leaders position themselves and their organizations as legitimate and authentic fighters for their country’s democratic structures, if not even as its savior. Moreover, as most of the organizations of sample A have their historical roots in the Sandinista Revolution, they seem to feel particularly in charge of and able to criticize present autocratic tendencies under the Ortega government. A representative of a women’s CSO justifies their radical criticism of the governing party since its return to power in 2007:

»So we, this movement, are the ones that dispose of the let’s say moral authority and political capacity to criticize the government’s acting from an ideological perspective. Because we have our roots, our feminist ideology in the political left, too. So there are always interests and this causes many tensions particularly because in the past they had aligned or wanted to disarticulate us as well. And this is why the movement has been a symbol of attack in the context of the return to power of the Sandinista government.« (Int. 24)

In addition to that, the leaders of sample A further highlight the chasm between their organizations and the government by their recurrence to intense and war vocabulary. The interviewees describe their agenda and objectives with words such as »battle« or »fight«, they want to »defend de-
mocracy« (int. 11) or wish to »rescue the democratic process« as in the quote below:

»In this context it’s even more difficult because it implies not only to fight for your own agenda, but to fight for the whole country’s agenda, because it’s about rescuing the democratic process again.« (Int. 24)

On the other side, however, the interviewees are eager to dissociate themselves from any party-political affiliations or aspirations. They seem to fear their proper vulnerability in the face of the blurring boundaries between political parties and CSOs and a weak or non-existent party-political opposition in Nicaragua. Instead, they emphasize their original role as civil society and distance themselves from the uncritical use of the term opposition:

»But actually our role is to defend democracy and freedom, this is our mission. With broad participation, the broader the better. From this perspective we perform the role of the opposition, when they violate democracy, we are in opposition to that. But we are not an opposition in the party-political sense used here in Nicaragua.« (Int. 11)

Taken together, the organizations of sample A in their antagonism to the current government strategically position themselves as a critical, oppositional and democratic force. In the absence of strong oppositional political parties and democratic alternatives and as they consider themselves to represent the only autonomous and therefore authentic civil society, they tend to present themselves as the last remaining force able to save democracy in a highly challenging regime context in Nicaragua.

7.2.6.2 Sample B: Neutral service providers

In comparison to the former CSO leaders, those of sample B present themselves demonstratively as neutral observers of the political context who concentrate on providing services and practical assistance to the population. They do not openly support nor criticize the political context or regime structures. Rather, their strategy seems to be to distance themselves from any evaluation or criticism in order to avoid confrontation. Moreover, they support and strive for cooperation with public authorities on a technical level as long as it helps them to implement their agenda.

As already visible in the previous issues, the interviewees from sample B more or less avoided all reference to the government or any ideological debate about politics or political objectives. Whether asked for the highly controversial concept of civil society in Nicaragua, their personal motiva-
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tion or the challenges they face (in a repressive regime context), they tend to dwell on a neutral and detailed analysis of the socio-economic problems and context in Nicaragua. With that, they avoid any personal or emotional comment on the existing controversial debates. The interviewees seem reluctant to take position and, in turn, tend to emphasize their neutrality and de-political orientation and distance from any party affiliation or ambition to incite politically. When talking about their objectives and their agenda as organizations, they do not raise claims to influence politics but direct their work exclusively to the Nicaraguan population and particularly their target groups. The focus of their work lies on service provision and assistance to improve the general living conditions of the Nicaraguan people. Asked for their strategies to achieve their objectives, they refer to their attempts to raise awareness, educate and change people’s minds – but avoid any reference to the political situation. Consistent with the deliberate avoidance of any political discussion, the language style in their interviews again is that of experts, technical and considerate, instead of emotionally or ideologically charged.

Moreover, the organizations of sample B see public authorities independent from their political orientation as necessary partners for the implementation of their agenda. Against this background, they do cooperate with government institutions whenever necessary. More precisely, they mention the consultation with local authorities where they plan to execute their projects or the invitation of public officials to workshops as common forms of cooperation and exchange with authorities (int. 31, int. 19). Although they admit to face difficulties sometimes, their strategy of adaptation and cooperation seems to allow them a certain degree of interaction with the government.

On the whole, the organizations of sample B present themselves as highly efficient and professional service providers that contribute to long-term, structural improvements and the transformation of the country. Concentrating on their target groups and particular problems, they seem to work relatively independent from the respective political context. Their leaders refrain from any political ambition or ideological debate and present themselves as neutral observers.

7.2.6.3 Sample C: Part of the continued Revolution

»It’s clear that this model has succeeded and softened up our union banners. The government adjusts the salaries annually, the government fulfills the conditions of the minimum wage and the commission responsible for the minimum wage unites
every month. The government cares about improving the conditions of workers, it approved the Bono Cristiano, Socialista y Solidario which I told you costs about 57-60 million dollar. This is really working, do you think that a rightist government would give such an amount of money to the workers? – It wouldn’t, nor would these corrupt unions that support them. (…) This is done only by a government that really works for the poor, and because of that we say that we have to support this government.« (Int. 19)

Regarding their self-positioning in the present regime structures, the organizations of sample C in contrast to both other groups present themselves as active consultants and stakeholders with excellent relations to public authorities. They seek for close cooperation and consensus and feel part of the Revolution as promoted by the Ortega government. Against this background, they stand out for their general optimistic attitude and most positive perception of the current state of affairs in the country.

Asked about how they implement their agenda and achieve their objectives in the present political context, the members of sample C coincide in a common strategy. Their way is to put and promote members in decisive positions in political institutions and to work close and in cooperation with the current government. Thereby they feel able to best assert their interests and perceive themselves as a powerful force in the country. Practically this means that the organizations of sample C tend to have members who occupy political posts at the local if not at the national level to be able to influence and to improve understanding and communication with political stakeholders. One of the leaders summarizes:

»Hence, the struggle for power runs like that, to have representation where macro, transversal decisions for society are taken. And because of that, we say that we have to be represented in Parliament, we have to be in the PARLACEN (Parlamento Centroamericano), we have to be supported, we have to be on the government’s side. And we have been constructing these relations and been in contact with Daniel since the 1980s up until he returned to power.« (Int. 19)

Second, the strategy presented by the leaders of this sample goes along with an overly optimistic presentation of their influence and working conditions as CSOs. Contrasting to both other groups of interviewees, it stands out that they do not only openly seek for influence but also have an overall positive impression of their possibilities and power. The interviewees perceive the general context as conducive and privileged for civic participation and are satisfied with their particular role in it. They state that they are consulted and heard in decision-making processes, whether via public discussions, written proposals, or the informal exchange of ideas and opinions:
Thus we talk about incidence as we enjoy some prestige – because we have a structure and we have proposals. This obviously allows us to incite and influence in politics (...). So here we are with suggestions, with alternatives, we present them and we discuss them.« (Int. 26)

Third, the clearly strong embeddedness of these organizations within the present regime structures becomes visible as well in their closeness to and their cooperation with the present government. Next to their personal ties to the country’s political institutions and powers, the leaders also report about their close and regular cooperation with the government in the form of workshops, training programs and in the execution of the government’s popular social programs. Throughout the interviews, they emphasize their excellent relations with the Ortega administration and the other divisions of government.

»We are in permanent communication with our government and also with some representatives of the other state powers. I for example have excellent relations and exchange with the President of the Supreme Court of Justice. Our organization has excellent communication with the President of the National Parliament, as we have a union there in the Parliament, and as well in the Supreme Electoral Council. Thus, we dispose of good relations to them, as well as with the government. It’s an excellent relation.« (Int. 19)

Fourth, the leaders of sample C argue that their strategic positioning as cooperation partners of the state and its institutions grounds in their interest in finding a general consensus for the good of the country. They are convinced that Nicaragua will only overcome its structural socio-economic problems united, based on dialogue and consensus, with the inclusion of all parts of the population – and under the Ortega administration. They strive to convince and mobilize the people in favor of the present government in order to achieve social change as a joint effort and in the form of the continued Revolution.

The strong identification of this group of organizations with the governmental party was visible as well in a meeting of different trade unionists the author of this thesis attended in Managua in August 2013. At the end of a meeting to plan their upcoming activities, a representative of a union’s youth organization closed the discussion with the remark »we are unionists, but first of all, we are Sandinists« – demonstrating her deep loyalty to the party and even willingness to subordinate the organization’s interests to those of the Sandinista Party. Furthermore, this at least partial subordination of identity is also visible in the interviews, for example in the reproduction of the language and argumentation style of the Nicaraguan government. The interviewees use slogans taken from the official party discourse such as »vivir bonito, limpio, sano, saludable« (int. 19), they de-
scribe their work as »poder ciudadano«, refer to the government as the 
government of national unity and reconciliation« (int. 17) and to the 
President simply as »Daniel« (int. 19).

By and large, the CSOs of sample C position themselves as active con-
sultants in the present regime context which they describe as open and 
conducive to civic organization. They highlight the virtues of consensus, 
negotiation, and reconciliation and share close personal and institutional 
ties and contacts to the whole Ortega administration. Thereby, they pre-
sent themselves as indispensable part of the ongoing Revolution under the 
current government.

7.3 Summary

This chapter analyzed the present landscape of CSOs in Nicaragua with a 
focus on three major groups of organizations classified based on the expert 
interviews as critical (sample A), de-political (sample B) and party-loyal 
(sample C) organizations. These classifications served as a starting point 
for in-depth interviews with leaders from three respective samples of or-
ganizations. The chapter presented the findings juxtaposing their narra-
tives – concerning their motivation as members, their concepts of civil so-
ciety, their agenda, their perception of challenges and their strategic posi-
tioning in the present regime context. The findings support the three-part 
division of the Nicaraguan CSO sector along essentially political lines or 
ambitions.

The first group of CSOs stands out for its political agenda and engage-
ment in the most controversial working fields of human rights, good gov-
ernance or citizen participation. It features part of the country’s intellec-
tual elite, its members are highly politicized and perceive themselves as 
strongest oppositional force to an increasingly autocratic President.

The second group refers to the usually highly professional and interna-
tionally supported development CSOs. These are formalized expert organ-
izations focusing on the provision of services for particular target groups 
in the less controversial fields of health, poverty reduction or education. 
They have a historically important share in the country’s socio-economic 
development. In the present context, they deliberately refrain from any po-
itical intervention and confrontation with the government and present 
themselves as de-political and neutral service providers.

The third group of CSOs finally concerns an increasing number of organi-
izations whose loyalty and existence is directly linked to the current presi-
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dency of Daniel Ortega and the Sandinista party. Their aim is to free the poor out of their historical discrimination and they engage in a variety of fields and dispose of cross-class representation. These organizations perceive the present context as highly conducive for their engagement and objectives. They feel part of the continued Revolution promoted by the President and, as a consequence, are willing to subordinate their agenda to the general good of the country. Table 9 summarizes the three groups, their narratives and key features comparatively.

Table 9: The three groups of CSOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expert classification</th>
<th>Sample A</th>
<th>Sample B</th>
<th>Sample C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Critical CSOs</td>
<td>De-political CSOs</td>
<td>Party-loyal CSOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members and their motivation</td>
<td>Engagement as a way of life</td>
<td>Between profession and vocation</td>
<td>Advocates for the poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil society concept</td>
<td>Civil society as civic resistance against authority (strong identification)</td>
<td>Civil society as a technical term and functional concept (weak identification)</td>
<td>Civil society as a <em>modus vivendi</em> for neoliberals and misused concept (rejection)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agenda and meta-objectives</td>
<td>The broader struggle for democracy</td>
<td>Structural societal and economic change</td>
<td>Empowering the poor through the revival of the Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of challenges and context</td>
<td>Nicaragua at a crossroads between return to authoritarian past and democracy</td>
<td>Nicaragua as a developmental country with severe socio-economic and historical-cultural deficits</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positioning in regime context</td>
<td>Last remaining force able to save democracy</td>
<td>Professional and efficient but neutral service providers</td>
<td>Active and powerful stakeholders close to the government</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author
The following chapter discusses the presented findings on the context, the challenges and the CSO sector in order to finally evaluate the CSOs’ potential to bring about change in the given hybrid regime context.
8. Discussion

The preceding chapters 5-7 presented the findings derived from the two-part field study in Nicaragua. Guided by the research questions (RQ 1-4) outlined in the introduction, they first provided insights into the practical manifestation of hybrid regime structures and the resulting challenges for CSOs in the country. Subsequently, they presented a three-part classification of the present Nicaraguan CSO sector – sketching the different groups’ evolution, their central characteristics, and their narratives that give insight into their position in the present regime context.

To provide answers to the overall research interest, this chapter discusses these results and relates them to the theoretical considerations on hybrid regimes and civil society outlined in chapter 2. CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua – challenging or maintaining the status quo?

8.1 A sector under pressure

The theoretical considerations in chapter 2 highlighted the overall democratic-participatory functions attributed to CSOs in the common literature on civil society. These let them appear as potential if not desirable actors to close the gap between only formal democratic structures and consolidated democracy in hybrid regime contexts. For the selected case of Nicaragua, CSOs seem to be predestined to break open hybrid regime structures in the three identified dimensions. First, as watchdogs which depict and curtail the autocratic tendencies of Nicaraguan authorities, they may defend and uphold democratic institutionalization (political-institutional dimension). Second, as service providers and primary recipients of funding from international cooperation, they can contribute to the alleviation of socio-economic deficits and inequality (socio-economic dimension). Third, as grassroots schools of democracy, they can promote citizen participation and foster the anchorage and appreciation of democratic values among the population (socio-cultural dimension). In addition to that, Nicaragua historically disposes of relatively high levels of civic engagement. These root in its revolutionary past and in the activation and top-down foundation of organizations during the 1980s as well as in the
massive support by external donors provided to the Nicaraguan CSO sector since the end of the civil war in 1990.

The empirical findings drawn from the field study in the first place, however, highlight the enormous challenges faced by CSOs in the present regime context in Nicaragua, and show how they impact the sector’s genuine features and natural potential to promote democratic change. Be it the government’s attempt to control CSOs, their economic dependency on foreign support or the lacking anchorage of democratic values among the population – the hybrid regime structures translate into considerable pressures for the Nicaraguan CSO sector.

Particularly the existing ambiguities characteristic of hybrid regimes seem to challenge CSOs far more than expected. For example, while the legal framework in Nicaragua stipulates participation and civic organization, many CSOs in practice are unable to fully implement and execute their rights in the face of an omnipotent government and (politicized) institutions which are unable or unwilling to protect them. Also, since its beginnings the sector has been supported by international cooperation with money, staff, and expertise. However, this crucial role of foreign donors obligates CSOs to adhere to donors’ proper interests, to live with fickle and conditional support, to formalize and professionalize and with that increase their distance to the basic population and their own original agenda. Furthermore, on the one hand, Nicaragua stands out for high official participation levels and support of democracy. On the other, in practice many CSOs are struggling with the population’s lack of support and appreciation and their own historical deficits regarding expertise, collaboration, and internal democratic structures.

As stated above, this overall difficult context naturally impacts the shape, future evolution, and functionality of the Nicaraguan CSO sector as the existing pressures make CSOs adapt their strategies and activities. Based on the findings, one can presently make out the following developments within the sector: First of all, part of the sector (in the following called service providers) seems to avoid or has restrained from political lobbying, advocacy and protest – as this might be understood as an illegitimate political incidence and interference with the government’s realms. Instead, these organizations tend to focus on the provision of services and assistance to the broad population or their specific target groups. Related to that, there is a general anxiety to stay away from issues related to the promotion and defense of democratic values, such as (human) rights, participation or good governance.
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Instead, an increasing number of CSOs seems to focus on less controversial issues such as health, environmental protection or education. These fields are less likely to provoke state authorities because they do not immediately interfere with or question the government and its policies.

A second visible tendency is the high party-political politicization of part of the Nicaraguan CSO sector (in the following called *satellites*). Be it because of their ideological conviction or their search for protection and support given their proper weaknesses concerning their scope of action, funding or popular support – many CSOs forthrightly pursue approximation towards the current government. This tendency stipulates processes of co-optation, subordination and party-political monopolization.

Figure 6: Triangle of conflicting priorities

![Triangle Diagram](image)

Source: Author

Lastly, on the other side, the findings also point to a trend towards radicalization and increased resistance among some parts of the sector (in the following called *critical opposition*). The current pressures here translate into increasing belligerence, politicization, and protest – making some organizations even pass the boundaries to assume the role of the currently weak if not absent party-political opposition.

Altogether, while these processes can be considered a natural if not necessary consequence of the existing pressures and might in the short run
even serve to assure the sector’s survival, they also endanger some of the most genuine characteristics and strengths of CSOs. These include their autonomy, their representation within the population, their ability to execute pressure from below and their diversity and plurality.

By and large, the overall challenge for CSOs in the present hybrid regime context in Nicaragua seems to be to find a way how to position themselves in the resulting triangle of pressures and conflicting priorities. In order to live up to their potentials, to preserve their character as CSOs and to guarantee their long-term existence, they have to maintain their autonomy from state or external influences, to regain the factual power to shape the country’s development, and strive not to lose their representation within the broad population. So far, the outlined pressures seem to have furthered polarization and fragmentation, indurated the frontiers and strengthened competition within the Nicaraguan CSO sector. Figure 6 illustrates this triangle of conflicting priorities arising for the Nicaraguan CSO sector from the hybrid regime context. Besides, it already sketches the three-part typology of CSOs discussed in the following chapter.

8.2 A (functional) typology of CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua

Relating the findings drawn from the field study to the theoretical considerations on CSOs from the beginning allows to elaborate a (functional) typology of CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua. Sections 8.2.1. - 8.2.3. comparatively evaluate the sector's three pillars, discussing their strengths and weaknesses in view of the identified conflicting priorities of autonomy, representation and influence. Altogether, the presented typology illustrates the CSOs’ different positioning in the given regime context and, closely related to that, their potential to challenge the present status quo and promote democratic consolidation.

8.2.1 The critical opposition: Fighters for liberal democracy … isolated and in factual decline

»And the other group of civil society is a group that works in political advocacy. This group has a lot of difficulties, a lot of problems but part of it is clearly dedicated to the search and protection of liberties in the country.« (Int. 15)

The first pillar of the typology of the Nicaraguan CSO sector consists of CSOs that primarily fulfill classic democratic-participatory functions and
stand out for their belligerence. In the hybrid regime context in Nicaragua, they practically assume the role of the apparently nearly absent critical opposition.

As the interviews with both experts and CSO leaders themselves confirm, their most visible characteristic is their fight for the promotion and proliferation of liberal-democratic values. Their specific focuses range from the fight for gender equality to the defense of rights of particular vulnerable groups such as indigenous communities, children, or the disabled, to the general promotion of citizen participation. The interviewed leaders of these organizations stand out for their belligerence and pro-democratic spirit. They perceive democracy as a value on its own and share a broad understanding which goes beyond the implementation of free and fair elections, but also includes the fight against corruption and populism, the validness of political and civic liberties, pluralism and the promotion of citizen engagement. Moreover, they share a conception of civil society as a vanguard of emancipation, liberty and pluralism and as a necessary control mechanism to state authorities.

Altogether, these CSOs seem to primarily fulfill standard democratic-participatory functions. They represent the politically engaged part of civil society that wants to influence decision-making processes, to set an agenda, stimulate debates, and spread the values of active citizenship, tolerance and participation. Also, they perform the role of a watchdog given the autocratic attitudes of past and present Nicaraguan governments.

In the hybrid regime context, the strength of these self-nominated autonomous CSOs is their relatively high level of independence from state or party structures and their courage to question existing political, socio-economic and cultural structures. Moreover, they seem to be the only actors determined to question and attack the present government of President Ortega and its increasingly autocratic behavior in a context of biased media and a withdrawal of international donors. As the findings illustrate, their members do not hesitate to sacrifice their time and take the risk of discrimination, reputational damage, and even persecution to depict the government’s grievances and faults. This belligerence is even more noteworthy in the absence or silence of a critical party-political opposition and a population that seems to be caught between apathy and a tendency towards uncritical support of populist presidents. Their endeavor to denounce existing grievances and bring up controversial issues has, not least, turned them into the group most targeted by repression and persecution.

Against these visible pro-democratic potentials, however, stand a set of weaknesses and controversies. These are related to the critical opposi-
tion’s apparent obsession with overthrowing current President Ortega and their related distance to the broad population. Both features in the present context seem to favor their growing marginalization and disempowerment and restrict their practical scope of action.

In the interviews, the leaders of these organizations highlight their self-perception and presentation as autonomous organizations and their independence from third actors or external interests. They differentiate themselves from the other groups of CSOs which either subordinate their proper agenda to the government’s interests or are heavily supported by and oriented to the requirements of external donors – and see themselves as the only autonomous force that outrightly pursues the good of the country. However, in practice the CSOs of this pillar of the typology also underlie dependencies which might impact their sovereignty and liberties as organizations. This includes not only their proper strive for support by foreign funding and their closeness to oppositional political parties but also their increasingly rebellious oppositional attitude and radicalization. Particularly their leaders’ narratives illustrate how their proper politicization seems to have resulted in a kind of obsession with their enemy Ortega and the objective of his overthrow. The resulting refusal to negotiate or cooperate with the present government bears the risk of losing their democratic agenda out of sight and, not least, alienates them from the broad population. Furthermore, this positioning seems to be hazardous in a situation in which even critics admit that there is no political alternative to the current President. A breakdown of his government would consequently bear the risk of ending up in chaos, power games and even violence rather than democratic consolidation. Against this background, the interviewees’ perception of the context as not conducive to participation and their increasing marginalization contrasts with their reference to political incidence as one of their major objectives and strategies. While they criticize others for caving in and cooperating with the government, these CSOs seem to be increasingly isolated and deprived of their power to exert influence at all in the present situation.

In this context, an additional weakness of the critical opposition is their lack of support by the broad population and their resulting distance to the people. While most of these organizations originated in social movements in the fight against dictator Somoza or during the Revolution, they seem to be increasingly marginalized under the present political structures. On the one hand, they recruit their members from intellectual cycles of the small middle class and fight for immaterial values that might not be of first and foremost concern for the broad population. On the other, their radical cri-
tique of President Ortega clashes with the overall mood within the Nicaraguan population. In the face of an omnipotent but still popular President who successfully presents himself as savior of the historically underprivileged poor, their outright disaffirmation and refusal to cooperate seems to push them into the offside and decreases their factual power and scope of action.

Altogether, the strengths of the critical opposition lie in its most original ambition to fight against autocratic practices, to promote democratic values, rights and liberties. However, the organizations suffer from their increasing isolation and factual decline that, not least, result from their radical fight against an overall popular and omnipotent President. From a theoretical perspective, these CSOs most likely match the idea of civil society as a hope of democratization and freedom fighter reflected in the Neo-Tocquevillian discourse that gained momentum in the context of the third wave transition processes. They denounce democratic setbacks and socio-economic inequalities, put pressure on the government, and try to bridge the gap between formal democracy and the practical implementation and validity of democratic values. With that, they position themselves as the most significant democratic force in the country and the most potential challenger of the present status quo. However, in the given context, an antagonism arises between their normative intention and the broad population’s most urgent needs and interests. In Nicaragua, the immediate socio-economic deficits together with the current government’s popularity seem to superpose this pillar’s commitment to rights and liberties in the eyes of many people. As a consequence, the critical opposition presently finds itself increasingly isolated – with considerable damage to its influence and scope of action. Given its marginalization, ongoing repression, and numerical decline, its capability to challenge the status quo in practice seems to be rather marginal.

8.2.2 The service providers: Fostering the socio-economic foundations of democracy … without questioning the current status quo

»They don’t have a problem with the political system. This means they don’t care about what happens with our democracy. The child with cleft lips is the problem, the child with a burnt body. These are traditional organizations that help Nicaragua to become a better country, but they don’t question its configuration. They don’t have a problem with the regime, they don’t care about it, it’s not of importance to them at all.« (Int. 21)
The second pillar of the typology consists of CSOs that primarily fulfill functions concerning the provision of resources, services, and expertise. Active in the fields of health, education or poverty reduction, they assume the role of professional service providers that take over responsibilities and disburden the overstrained state.

Their most characteristic feature lies in their role as fundraisers and suppliers of resources in support of the Nicaraguan population. These organizations are responsible for a variety of projects and activities which from the past until today have had a considerable share in providing for the Nicaraguan population and contributing to the country’s socio-economic infrastructure.

Apart from their success in raising money and their successful cooperation with national and international donors, their professional personnel and expertise have historically enabled this group of organizations to occupy spaces which the Nicaraguan state cannot or simply does not want to occupy. Despite all potential criticism and obstruction by the government, their strength and importance as service providers makes them indispensable in a context of poverty, inequality, and a restricted state budget. Particularly their engagement in the classic social fields of health or poverty reduction contributes to raising the living standards of the general population and, not least, has shaped the country’s general socio-economic development. Moreover, their commitment in times of crises and emergency has helped to prevent or alleviate much humanitarian drama. This became most evident in the case of the country’s devastation by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 when these groups played a major role in raising and redistributing emergency aid from international cooperation.

Furthermore, another characteristic strength of the service providers is their search for consensus and cooperation with the Nicaraguan authorities – be it because donors refer to the state as a central figure in the development and prosperity of the country or just because CSOs themselves are reliant on the government’s approval to implement their projects. The deliberate neutral positioning and alienation from public and harsh criticism of the government and present regime structures guarantees their survival in the current context. Although the government also tries to obstruct and restrict their work, they have been less in the focus of attention. They seem to be more successful to find a way to continue working under the present circumstances and preserve a certain leeway of action – at least compared to the more radical CSOs of the critical opposition.

From a broader perspective, the biggest strength of these CSOs may be their potential to provide for the socio-economic foundations of democra-
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cy. By contributing to satisfy the most fundamental needs and raising the
general living standards of the population, they provide the ground for
making the people receptive and capable of caring about their country’s
democratic development, their rights and liberties. In addition to that, their
work targeted at raising the level of education and general awareness of
their rights and duties as citizens contributes to the empowerment of the
people in the sense of helping them to help themselves.

Altogether, this second pillar of the Nicaraguan CSO sector stands out
as an expression of national and international solidarity with the Nicaraguan people. Especially with regard to their strong international ties
(through donors, founders, international staff or partner organizations),
these organizations can be seen as symbolizing the idea of help and support
for the poorest and most vulnerable parts of the population. Since
their boom in the 1990s, they have pushed the country’s development in a
twofold way. First, by providing for the population and lifting its socio-economic status. Second, by laying the socio-economic grounds for an
increased awareness and appreciation of democratic values and citizen participation within the broad population.

On the other side, the particular characteristics of this part of the sector bear certain weaknesses as well, which root in its artificial character with
organizations that are often completely sponsored if not founded by foreign initiative.

A first weak point is the proposed neutrality and autonomy emphasized
by the leaders of the service providers in the interviews. These strongly
clash with the experts’ evaluations as they seem to be undermined by their
dependence on their donors’ interests. The findings reveal a discrepancy
between the leaders’ self-presentation as de-political or neutral actors and
their actual degree of dependence and need to adapt to the given circumstances. It is clear that the organizations of this group are the ones most affected by the withdrawal of international cooperation. They traditionally share close ties to national and international donors and are the most likely recipients of support. Hence, they are at the same time the ones most dependent and forced to adapt to their donors’ priorities and restrictions outlined earlier, culminating in donors’ impact on their agenda and formal structure. Closely related to this, another weak point is this part of the sector’s professional if not service mentality and artificial character and their resulting lack of representation within the population. As visible in their narratives, the leaders understand themselves in the first place as professionals, experts, and providers of services. They care about the country and all of them seem to be deeply committed to their work and organiza-
tion. However, most of them remain full-time employed experts and belong to the tiny, well-educated middle class. They understand their engagement as their job that serves as their main income source which they most likely will not risk to lose.

Against this background, a further vulnerable point of the service providers seems to be the discrepancy between their high degrees of visibility and professionality and their deliberate self-restriction. These organizations, by backing down from specific controversial working fields and by restricting their work to supposed de-political working fields, risk to reduce themselves to the role of technical service providers and rather marginal bystanders. In the quote below, an expert summarizes this argument by classifying these CSOs as an overestimated part of civil society, as organizations useful as supporters and suppliers of resources, but not as an actor of change and transformation or even a central model of civil society (int. 21). After all, while their money and professionalism give them publicity and presence, these CSOs tend to remain a rather marginal and artificial actor unsuitable to really promote democratic change (at least in the short run).

»I’ve seen no country that prospered under this model. I don’t think there is any societal organization, civil society, that flourishes with this model. This model is important for capacitation, to give ideas, accompany processes, provide resources, but not as a central model. That is, I don’t think that this model will disappear, it came to stay, the model of NGOs. It will survive for I don’t know how many years, but it will continue. The problem is when it’s supposed to be the base for a transformation of society.« (Int. 21)

A last criticism connected to that even targets the direct consequences of this group’s positioning as neutral service providers. By concentrating their work on tackling the population’s most urgent needs, these organizations take over functions the government is not willing or able to fulfill. First, it is questionable whether this does not further increase the country’s dependency and prevent long-term socio-economic development. Second, their commitment to the population with which they strengthen the general contentedness and prosperity may − at least in the short run − take pressure from and stabilize the regime. Their purposeful avoidance to take position and their visible anxiety not to bicker the government could be perceived as a toleration of, if not subordination to existing hybrid regime structures.

By and large, this second pillar of the typology most ostensibly resembles a developmental conception of civil society typical for a sector promoted if not in large parts built up in the framework of international coop-
eration. Their classic third sector functions as service deliverers, executors of programs and experts turn these CSOs into a significant factor for the country’s socio-economic infrastructure. However, they also seem to restrict some of their genuine features as CSOs; after all, these organizations risk to be guided by if not completely dependent on their donors’ interests and constraints that, in the end, promote professional but rather bureaucratic, artificial machines instead of a vivid and lively landscape of organizations. – A phenomenon succinctly expressed by the British historian Garton Ash in the phrase »we dreamed of civil society and got NGOs« (Ishkanian 2008: 61, citing Garton Ash 2004).

Against this background, this part of the sector’s role in the present hybrid regime context remains ambiguous. These CSOs seem to tolerate, and, from a short term perspective, even stabilize the present regime structures. They satisfy the immediate needs and strengthen the contentment of the broad population (political-institutional dimension), while they disburden the state (socio-economic dimension) and refrain from any type of activism and interference (socio-cultural dimension). However, the long-term effect of their work is far more difficult to evaluate and so far under-researched. The central question here is whether they, in the long run, manage to foster the country’s socio-economic infrastructure and, with that, contribute to lay the socio-economic foundations of democracy.

By and large, weighing the strengths and weaknesses of this group of organizations, their potential to challenge existent regime structures becomes less important than their physical presence and visibility at first glance suggests. The service providers stand out as a symbol of humanitarian solidarity and for their help and assistance to the population in need. However, they remain a rather elitist and non-representative actor that with its self-restriction to service provision and its hesitation to take position self-restricts its factual power and ability to promote change in the given context. Moreover, regarding its prospects, this part of the sector numerically remains completely dependent on the future development of international development cooperation to Nicaragua. If donors continue to withdraw and if the organizations do not manage to realign and make up new resources, they risk to disappear – with probably devastating effects for the Nicaraguan population, at least in the short run.
8.2.3 The satellites: »Popular organizations« … completely dependent on the party in power

»They form part of civil society, but without autonomy, completely coopted by the state. This means, the day that Daniel Ortega instructs them to stop a strike, they will do so immediately, because they don’t respond anymore to the people who chose them. They respond to a supreme interest, it’s the old scheme of a party that has satellite organizations that orbit around society, control society and invade all areas of society.« (Int. 21)

The third pillar of the CSO sector in Nicaragua consists of those organizations that mobilize and organize the population in line with the current government’s interests. These satellites more than both other groups fulfill a set of integrative functions attributed to civil society, serving as intermediates between the government and the people and as spaces of community and local engagement. However, their work remains restricted to those parts of the population that are loyal to the Sandinista party.

The most characteristic strengths of the satellites are their relatively strong links and roots in the broad population and their present numerical predominance due to their good relations with the current government. In comparison to the other two pillars, most of these CSOs dispose of a high degree of regional and cross-class representation in Nicaraguan society. The group includes a high percentage of member-based organizations such as labor unions or local CPCs and stands out for its diverse membership according to class, age, and gender. With their country-wide presence and their focus on the most basic forms of organization, these organizations provide a platform for citizen engagement and bring the idea of participation to the broad population. This capacity becomes of particular importance in the face of the historically low degrees of trust in the country’s political and economic elites and the risk of apathy and isolation. Moreover, it stands out in the face of an otherwise rather elitist, either politically isolated or bureaucratic and professionalized CSO sector that recruits its members predominantly from the middle class. As self-nominated »popular« organizations these CSOs break with the widespread image of civil society in Nicaragua as rather artificial, externally promoted and elitist professional actors. Building on the idea of local self-organization, they aim at activating the people to get engaged and care about their communities, to participate actively and bring in their ideas and use their proper resources to bring their society forward; be it through the mobilization of workers for their rights, the organization of youth for health or literacy campaigns in the rural areas, or the formation of
community committees trying to participate and shape their communities’ development.

In addition, the satellites also fulfill an important role in the execution and implementation of the government’s welfare policies. In the face of the country’s general lack of infrastructure and resources, they serve to implement popular programs such as Zero Hunger or Usury Zero and carry out vaccination and education campaigns that directly reach the population. Based on their relatively good disposition of resources and support from state institutions, they have a crucial share in the population’s well-being and basic needs. Against this background, the satellites’ apparently close connection to authorities and institutions appears as a further strength. As both experts and the organizations’ leaders themselves confirm, they dispose of close relations with the current government and they are the group that is least likely to suffer from persecution and arbitrary attacks. Moreover, they seem to present the only part of the sector that the government accepts as civil society and the one with most leeway of action and influence. Together with their strong member base in the population, this closeness results in a high degree of visibility, popularity and appreciation by the people. More than other parts of the sector, they seem to give the people the feeling of inclusion and active participation – independent from their educational background and capacities. Their apparently deep integration into the current political structures enforces their potential to act as mediators who are able to communicate the people’s needs to the government and serve as a kind of mouthpiece of the broad population.

By and large, this group’s biggest strengths are its regional and cross-class representation and embeddedness within the present political context. These characteristics enable them to identify and communicate the needs of the broad population to the government, but as well to execute social programs, distribute information, goods, and services. Their good relation with the current government has presently turned them into the most visible and active group with high member rates and least difficulties among the whole CSO sector.

Against this comparatively high numerical presence and theoretical influence, however, stand the satellites’ party-political bias and their factual subordination to the government in power. In practice, their potential scope of action resulting from their before-mentioned representation and support through state authorities, is impaired by the organizations’ closed and party-monitored character. The findings show that boundaries are blurred (if not identical) between party-political membership and engage-
ment in this group. Experts criticize its strong party-political bias and lack of autonomy from the governing party. This impression is supported in their leaders’ narratives, where they present their apparently unconditional loyalty towards and identification with President Ortega and the Sandinista party. On the one hand, this party bias risks to result in a subordination of their original agenda to the party’s policies – massively restricting their potential power and scope of action. On the other side, in practice, it leads to exclusion and discrimination of all those not eager to join the party and stand up for President Ortega. The organizations’ endowment with public resources and their power as executors of the government’s programs imparts them with much power and favors a biased distribution of goods if not power abuse. As a consequence, the present numerical power of these CSOs risks strengthening existing inequalities and not least society’s party-political polarization and split within the population.

The ambiguity that marks this part of the sector is reflected as well in surveys which show that significant parts of the population tend to perceive these organizations as a control mechanism (Booth / Seligson 2013). They serve to supervise acceptance and organize the society in the interests of the government in power. After all, they will immediately lose not only their main incomings but as well their legitimation source and identity in the case of a government change. Against this background, they hardly function as an open platform for citizen engagement and participation of the whole population independent from party-political orientation. Hence, visibly in all of the interviews, these organizations tend to subordinate their proper agenda to the success and the support of President Ortega. They rather react to the government’s orders (»orientations«), than serve to communicate the people’s interests, and risk being reduced to the role of a party organ that promotes and defends the party’s interests. This stands in clear contradiction to their self-presentation as advocates for the people and powerful stakeholders within the regime.

From a theoretical perspective, this part of the sector can be linked to those types of organizations discussed within research on nondemocratic regimes and particularly resembles the historical model of civil society under socialist dictatorships. The *satellites* »orbit« around the government and perform the role of transmission belts that support and communicate the President’s project of a new Revolution to the broad population. They dispose of high levels of representation and function as official contacts to the government, but, in fact, are rather powerless as they pay their prominent position with their proper agenda and autonomy. The embedded organizations fulfill central functions for the regime’s stability and persis-
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tence; they help to implement the government’s policies, they mobilize support for the President and serve as a recruitment source for party-political posts. Not least, they strengthen the regime’s legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. A look at the prospects of this part of the sector, however, points up to the other side of the coin; these organizations’ future existence completely depends on the present government in power and a voting out of the Sandinista party might radically change their present numerical predominance and influence.

By and large, the satellitess due to their lack of autonomy risk becoming lost in their role as party agents and supporters of the present political status quo instead of using their numerical and representative power to serve as intermediaries between the government and the people and even question existing regime structures. While their connection to the population is strong, their strength and popularity completely depend on the government in power. Accordingly, their actual ability to represent their members’ interests and to promote societal change is at stake while they risk being reduced to mere henchmen of the governing party. In the given context, the satellitess’ unconditional support for an (increasingly) omnipotent government seems most likely to foster the persistence of hybrid regime structures in Nicaragua.

Figure 7 illustrates the established typology of CSOs in Nicaragua and the most likely influence of the different groups on the present status quo of hybrid regime structures.
### 8.2 A (functional) typology of CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua

#### Figure 7: Typology of CSOs in Nicaragua

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept of civil society</th>
<th>Critical opposition</th>
<th>Service providers</th>
<th>Satellites</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Functions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Neo-Tocquevillian</strong></td>
<td><strong>Developmental</strong></td>
<td><strong>Top-down organization</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic-participatory functions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Promote rights and liberties</td>
<td>– Provide resources, assistance and expertise to the population</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>– Denounce setbacks (‘watchdog’)</td>
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<tr>
<td>– Criticize and control the government</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strengths</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively promote democracy</td>
<td>Socio-economic support for the population</td>
<td>Regional and cross-class representation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belligerence and courage to oppose</td>
<td>Expression of international solidarity</td>
<td>Influence due to close relation and acceptence by the government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatively high degree of autonomy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weaknesses</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obsessed with President Ortega’s overthrow</td>
<td>Artificial and non-representative actors</td>
<td>Lack of autonomy (from party structures)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support by the broad population</td>
<td>Dependence on their donors’ interests</td>
<td>Subordinate their agenda to the government’s project</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of influence due to isolation and governmental repression</td>
<td>(Self-) restricted scope of action (to non-confictive working fields and strategies)</td>
<td>Strengthen party-political division of society</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prospect</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Isolated and in decline; their future depends on their ability to adapt to the given political situation</td>
<td>Dependent on support by international cooperation</td>
<td>On the upswing but dependent on the maintenance of the current government in power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Status Quo**

- **challenge**
- **tolerate**
- **support**
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8.3 Implications for the related fields of research

The results drawn from the field study in the selected case of Nicaragua are naturally rather complex and leave space for different interpretations and further questions on the CSO sector and its potential to bring about change in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua. The thesis’ aim from the outset, however, was not to measure and evaluate the concrete impact of CSOs but to question the overall normatively-charged expectations on CSOs and to shed light on the under-researched interrelation between regime structures and CSOs in a hybrid regime setting. Regarding the thesis’ contribution to the fields of research on civil society and hybrid regimes, we can derive the following considerations:

For the field of civil society research, the findings in the first place once more disclose the fragility of the civil society concept and the need to open it up to make it applicable for empirical research in different kinds of regimes. We have to look closely when studying CSO sectors in different parts of the world – in order to not miss or misunderstand central actors that may not fit our precast concept of civil society. This also includes our often normative conception of civil society as inherently good, benevolent, and pro-democratic, which is (even in liberal democratic contexts) deceptive and obfuscates the analysis.

Second, the findings for the selected case illustrate the diversity of CSOs, their different functions, agenda and embeddedness in the regime context. The established typology naturally presents ideal type organizations and does not cover each practically existing or possible form of CSOs in Nicaragua. Rather, it illustrates the sector’s general three-part division that evolved out of the country’s political, socio-economic and socio-cultural context – and the groups’ resulting different capacities and ambitions to bring about democratic change. It builds a starting point for further analyses that has to be checked for its validity and representation in other contexts as well.

Against this background, a third finding is that, moreover, the established typology of CSOs reflects different notions of civil society. Starting with the normative conception as a hope for democratization promoted in the tradition of de Tocqueville, the rather socio-economic perspective on service provision usually found within third sector studies, or Gramsci’s considerations on hegemony often reflected in research on civic organization in nondemocratic regimes. Furthermore, the findings highlight that in the regime itself there can be ideological struggles over the concept of civil society among rival actors. For the case of Nicaragua, the government...
and its followers promote their vision of a concept misused for neoliberal influences to hold against their idea of popular social grassroots organizations. Foreign donors, on the other hand, in their ambition not to come into conflict with existing political structures follow a pragmatic approach and promote de-political professional service providers in the sense of development aid workers. And, last, oppositional forces and intellectual circles count on CSOs to promote their agenda for democratization and liberalization and the breakdown of a − to their mind − hateful government.

Fourth, the interrelations between civil society and the overall regime context are mutual. Not only do CSOs impact on the political-institutional, socio-economic and socio-cultural context, but the context itself shapes, enables and impedes the CSO sector and its natural potential to bring about democratic change. In the case under study, only one part of the sector actively pursues to challenge the hybrid regime structures and promote democratization, while others rather tolerate or directly support the persistence of the current status quo. In fact, the numerically strongest and most visible part of the sector seems to be – at least under the present government – the one less interested in changing existing hybrid regime structures. Nonetheless, all groups equally have their merits, places, and advocates and the analysis of their strengths and weaknesses illustrates how the very organizations reflect these ambiguous regime structures. Their official presentation as freedom fighters, professional-neutral service assistants or popular grass-roots organizations naturally clashes with their in practice often distorted appearances.

Furthermore, the Nicaraguan case also provides fruitful insights for the broader field of studies on hybrid regimes. First, hybrid regime structures apparently reproduce in different dimensions and will most likely not be understood nor overcome by focusing on a country’s political-institutional setbacks. The ambiguities characteristic of hybrid regime structures also become apparent in the socio-economic and socio-cultural spheres, further supporting holistic approaches to democracy promotion. Second, the outlined different dimensions of regime-hybridity found for the Nicaraguan case also highlight the importance of further qualitative and in-depth research approaches. Against the background of predominantly quantitative and institution-centered studies of hybrid regimes, this points out the need to study non-state actors and deeper societal structures. The findings, not least, illustrate how such a look beyond institutions can provide further explanations for these regimes’ stability and persistence.

Third, the findings also highlight the need to reconsider the arrangement and effects of international cooperation in these kinds of regimes.

8.3 Implications for the related fields of research
While most of the support directed at CSOs since the 1990s may have reached a lot of people, it still bears the risk of hitting an empty target and of distorting the character of local CSO sectors. Donors promoting CSOs in hybrid regimes should take a particular eye on the question who they promote. They need to pay attention to their recipients’ position in the CSO sector, their representativeness and authenticity, and, not least, put aside their own (economic) interests.

By and large, the findings for the case of Nicaragua further highlight the general need to take CSOs into account as a subject of investigation in hybrid regimes. Not only as potential agents of change, but also concerning their impact on the stabilization and persistence of autocratic legacies and hybrid regime structures.
9. Conclusion

This thesis centered on a qualitative case study of the CSO sector and hybrid regime structures in Nicaragua with the aim to explore the particular features, functions, and challenges of CSOs in the given context. Are CSOs in Nicaragua likely to challenge the status quo and promote democratic consolidation, as the predominant normative perspective on civil society suggests? Alternatively, might CSOs contribute to the maintenance and stabilization of existing hybrid regime structures?

The empirical findings were derived from a two-part field study. A background study analyzed the given regime structures and the resulting challenges for CSOs, drawing on interviews with a heterogeneous set of experts on Nicaraguan civil society, including scholars, journalists, donors and proper CSO representatives, and on a literature review. In the second part of the study, interviews with CSO leaders served to complete and illustrate a typology of the Nicaraguan CSO sector set up based on the experts’ evaluations. In the discussion, these empirical findings were matched with the theoretical considerations on CSOs and hybrid regimes outlined at the beginning of the thesis.

This conclusion summarizes the main results (9.1) to then critically reflect the research process, remaining desiderata and possibilities for future studies (9.2). Lastly, it provides an outlook on the country’s future developments and perspectives for democratic consolidation (9.3).

9.1 Summary of results

The first research question (RQ1) concerned the manifestation of hybrid regime structures as the general context of civic organization in Nicaragua. The findings exemplified that regime hybridity, defined here by a discrepancy between formal structures and their practical implementation or validity, manifests itself not only at the (most obvious) political-institutional level but covers different dimensions.

With regard to the political-institutional dimension, in Nicaragua we see the characteristic coexistence of, on one hand, formal democratic structures that developed since the Sandinista Revolution in 1979, and, on the other hand, persisting autocratic legacies centering on an omnipotent
executive, practically weak and politicized institutions, and a lack of serious opposition forces. In the socio-economic dimension, the ambiguous regime structures manifest themselves in a contradiction between the official socio-economic growth and support by international actors and the persisting and in the past even increasing poverty and inequality among the broad population. In the socio-cultural dimension, regime-hybridity finally appears as a discrepancy between formal support of democracy on the one hand, and the persistence of colonial thinking, populism, and discrimination among large parts of society on the other. Altogether these findings highlight the importance of societal, bottom-up structures for the stability and persistence of hybrid regimes and foreshadow the pressures and obstacles that underlie civic organization in Nicaragua.

The second research question (RQ2) concerned the challenges that arise out of this context for the Nicaraguan CSO sector.

In the political-institutional dimension, challenges result from the Nicaraguan government’s ambivalent concept of civil society and its corresponding ambition to control the CSO sector. Current President Ortega has made a habit of distinguishing between »bourgeois« organizations, to his mind monitored by foreign imperialist powers and driven by proper economic interests, and »popular« organizations that aim at promoting the country in close cooperation with the government. In its resulting endeavor to monitor the Nicaraguan CSO sector, the government applies different strategies. First of all, these include the repression of dissenting organizations through persecution, administrative harassment, the denial of access and information and the control of money flows from international cooperation. A second strategy is the building-up of a proper, party loyal CSO sector via the cooptation of traditional Sandinista-loyal organizations for the continued Revolution; the promotion of alibi organizations and counter-movements that compete with existing CSOs for funding, members, and public attention; and the substitution of existing spaces for CSOs through party-loyal participation structures (the so-called Citizens Power Councils, or CPCs). Lastly, the government’s third strategy can be summarized as the attempt to monitor civic engagement and the broad population’s support for the sector through material incentives, ideology, and force.

In the socio-economic dimension, the challenges for the CSO sector emerge out of the widespread poverty among the Nicaraguan population and many organizations’ dependence on international support. According to the findings, the lack of a strong middle class particularly impacts civic engagement by containing the general degree of participation, leading to
the peoples’ prioritization of assistance and service provision over the
fight for rights and liberties, and by enhancing indifference and
resignation within the population concerning the autocratic tendencies of
the governing elite. In addition to these impacts, the sector’s proper
historical pampering through foreign donors and its resulting dependence
on their support further challenge Nicaraguan CSOs: Bureaucratization
and NGO-ization processes distance the sector from the broad population
while donors’ proper interests and priorities let organizations depart from
their original mission and working fields. Moreover, the sudden with-
drawal of foreign support since 2007 has left many CSOs high and dry in
an overly conflictive situation.

In the socio-cultural dimension, CSOs in Nicaragua are challenged by
the low degrees of appreciation and education in the population and their
proper internal deficiencies. The persistence of autocratic structures and
values within the CSO sector, a general lack of solidarity and cohesion,
and many organizations’ inability to sell their merits to the broad
population put roadblocks in the way of many CSOs.

To summarize, the findings for RQ2 specified the tenuous framework
for civic organization in Nicaragua and foreshadowed the resulting long-
term consequences, including a shift towards less conflictive working
fields and strategies, tendencies of (de-)politicization, loss of autonomy in
favor of protection, and, on the extreme end, radicalization and conflict.

Against this background, research questions three and four (RQ3 /
RQ4) targeted the classification of the Nicaraguan CSO sector with an eye
to the role different groups of CSOs play in the hybrid regime context. As
a first step, a three-part typology of the sector was established based on
experts’ evaluations during the background study. Knowledge of these
three groups of CSOs was then deepened through subsequent interviews
with CSO leaders from three respective samples of organizations. A juxta-
position of their narratives gave insight into their motivation as members,
their conceptions of civil society, their activities and agenda, their percep-
tion of challenges, and their strategic positioning in the present regime
context.

The first group of CSOs in Nicaragua, typified as critical opposition,
primarily fulfills democratic-participatory functions. It stands out for its
political agenda and engagement in the most conflictive working fields of
human rights, good governance or citizen participation. It features part of
the country’s intellectual elite, and its members are highly politicized and
perceive themselves as strongest oppositional force to an increasingly au-
tocratic President. They are affected most by the government’s attacks and

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9. Conclusion

seem to have great difficulties to communicate their objectives to the broad population. These CSOs suffer from a general lack of influence and true power to realize their agenda. From a theoretical perspective, they dispose of the characteristic features associated with the normative understanding of civil society as an agent of democratization. This group is most determined to challenge existing regime structures and promote democratization – but finds itself increasingly isolated and marginalized in the given context.

The second group, typified as service providers, refers to the highly visible but rather small number of international CSOs and their local partner organizations. These are formalized expert organizations focusing on service delivery for particular target groups in the less controversial fields of health, poverty reduction, or education. They historically have played a significant role in the provision of the population with basic needs and in case of natural disasters but suffer from their artificiality and lack of representation. In the hybrid regime context, they deliberately refrain from confrontation and conflictive working fields, concerning their donors' as well as the Nicaraguan government’s interests. Against this background, their potential to challenge the hybrid regime structures remains weak while their socio-economic contribution might, in the short run, even stabilize present regime structures. The service providers suffer less repression than the former group due to their self-restricted scope of action, but their future depends almost entirely on the goodwill and support of international donors.

The third group, typified as satellites, embraces an increasing number of organizations with strong linkage and loyalty to the current President Ortega. These CSOs engage in a variety of fields, dispose of regional and cross-class representation and aim to free the poor in the course of the continuation of the Revolution. Given their close ties to the Sandinista party, they perceive the present context as highly conducive to civic engagement and, theoretically, have the biggest scope of action and influence. Due to cooptation, pressure, and, not least, personal conviction, however, these organizations tend to subordinate their agenda almost entirely to the government’s policies. Against this background, their individual leeway and factual power is rather weak. They are, however, numerically on the upswing. The satellites most likely serve as warrantors of the present status quo. After all, their agendas and future depend on the present government’s continuance in power.

On the whole, the findings for Nicaragua outline the intricate interrelation between the hybrid regime context and the potentials of the CSO sec-
tor. From a theoretical perspective, the historical landscape of CSOs appears as auspicious actor to bridge the gap between only formal structures and a real anchorage of democracy. In practice, however, the given hybrid regime structures challenge the CSO sector far more than expected and with tenuous effects on the genuine features commonly associated with the notion of civil society. These include the sector’s autonomy from governmental or donors’ interests, its representation and plurality, and its actual power to influence developments in the country. In a context of indurating hybrid regime structures, the Nicaraguan CSO sector seems to be increasingly lost in a triangle of conflicting priorities and pressures that impair its natural potential to act as an agent of change and challenge the status quo.

9.2 Critical reflection on the research process and remaining questions

A research process usually concludes with a reflection on the selected research design, outcomes and desiderata, and potential for future work. For this thesis, the most controversial aspects concerned the deliberately explorative approach, the choice of Nicaragua as a single case, and, as a result, the validity and generalizability of results for further research.

The selected exploratory approach involved a broad conceptualization of CSOs and an abdication of pre-formulated hypotheses in favor of a consistent approximation to the object of study during the research process. Many central issues and actors only emerged in situ, enhancing an iterative study that strained the author’s flexibility and organizational talent, particularly because getting access to organizations and people in the limited time was difficult. In this context, a temporal split of both parts of the study would have allowed even more leeway for the incorporation and interpretation of first results during the research process – but was, however, discarded due to research pragmatic reasons (time and access). In this context, central desiderata concern the further study of particular parts of the Nicaraguan CSO sector that due to a lack of both accessibility and time have been neglected in this thesis. This includes taking into account CSOs in the country’s rural communities, the numerous church-related organizations as well as indigenous groups, particularly on the Eastern Coast. Although experts in the first part of the study suggested a similar three-part division of these organizations, too, a thorough study of these actors, the given local constraints, and opportunities would complete the overview of the Nicaraguan CSO landscape. By and large, however, the selected ex-
ploratory approach served well to satisfy the central research interest, allowing for original perspectives and in-depth insights into the Nicaraguan case that would have been less likely with a more rigid approach fixed in advance.

Furthermore, the choice of Nicaragua as a single case was disputable from the beginning; Nicaragua is a country with a small population whose geopolitical relevance rapidly diminished with the end of the Cold War. Moreover, the country’s unique recent history and geopolitical configuration naturally resound in the results; it manifests itself in the high degrees of politicization, the Sandinista Revolution as a central reference point or the massive influence of external powers. Nonetheless, the findings likewise highlight Nicaragua’s status as a valuable example of hybrid regime structures. Similar to other hybrid regimes, the country had almost no democratic experience before the revolution started in 1979; the newly developed democratic system then failed to reduce the high level of socioeconomic inequality and poverty; and although formal institutionalization was implemented rather quickly, time seems to have strengthened the ambiguous political structures more than it has promoted democratic consolidation.

Closely related to that, a central issue in single case studies concerns the generalizability and validity of results for the broader theoretical discussion. Against the given background, however, the results appear less singular but build a fruitful starting point for the study of CSOs in other hybrid regimes. After all, they suggest that CSO sectors here may face a corresponding set of challenges in the political-institutional, socio-economic and/or socio-cultural sphere with possible similar effects for their structure and major actors.

In this context, recent reports and news from other hybrid regime settings support a generalization of findings from Nicaragua, be it the ambivalence of several Eastern European governments towards the idea of civil society, expressed in a mixture of repression and a parallel promotion of loyal organizations; the difficulties arising from CSOs’ dependence on international actors, as common particularly in post-colonial countries; CSOs’ struggles with proper deficits such as the lack of expertise, experience, persisting hierarchic structures and competition; up to the philosophical struggle on the prioritization of rights and liberties compared to the satisfaction of basic needs. All in all, characteristic starting conditions in Nicaragua together with the latest empirical evidence from all over the world strongly suggest the findings’ suitability as a starting point for future research on CSOs and hybrid regimes. The choice...
of Nicaragua as a single case and the open approach happened deliberately bearing in mind the risk to restrict the study’s explanatory power. However, the findings once more illustrated how a qualitative and exploratory approach can provide valuable and inspiring findings that trespass the selected individual case or singular context.

Against this background, future research endeavors could take the findings as a starting point to analyze CSOs in hybrid regimes on a broader, even theoretical-conceptual level. By designing a model on the specific regime features and their (likely) interrelation with the CSO sector, the single case design could be extended to a comparative analysis of several cases, starting with the neighboring Central American countries and later expanding to hybrid regimes in other world regions. Also, a more thorough balance of empirical findings with theoretical considerations or the inclusion of interdisciplinary approaches promises tempting results. A comprehensive comparison of the different contexts of civic organization, the resulting challenges for CSOs, and the sectors’ central actors in different hybrid regimes would further enhance the study of democratization and civil society alike.

9.3 Country perspectives Nicaragua

The last step of reflection looks at recent developments in Nicaragua and the country’s likely prospects in the coming years.

A central issue since the conclusion of the field study in 2013 has been a set of constitutional reforms that came into force in 2014. These granted even more powers to the President and were perceived by critics as furthering the consolidation of power of the Ortega administration. Also, a new giant project envisaging the construction of a second inter-American canal passed in 2013 has further polarized the population (see FAZ 30.06.2015). The canal is thought to lift the poor majority out of poverty and push Nicaragua’s geopolitical importance, nourishing historical aspirations existent since colonial times. Still the project provokes criticism because it was approved with little public debate and consultation, and may be a violation of rights of property owners. There are also concerns about a lack of transparency concerning the funding by a Chinese entrepreneur as well as environmental issues (Freedom House 2015: Freedom in the World 2015: Nicaragua). At the same time, national elections held in November 2016 reinforced President Ortega’s power. The constitutional reforms had eliminated presidency term limits so that he was free and
willing to run for re-election while the party-political opposition seemed to be even weaker than in 2011 due to Ortega’s omnipotence and their proper inability to align and agree upon a common candidate.

As the President’s power presently seems to reinforce and with it the consolidation of hybrid regime structures, much depends on what happens after Ortega. As no other potential Sandinista candidate disposes of similar historic power and linkage to the party, Sandinista rule is likely to end with his departure, that is unless his wife manages to position herself as a worthy successor. In case of a victory of a liberal-conservative alternative, will the next President, once elected, abstain from extending his powers? After all, past presidents were not less autocratic, but just less powerful than Ortega as they were less charismatic leaders and faced much stronger opposition. Will they repeat their socio-economic mistakes of the past that increased inequality and poverty, except for the tiny political and economic elite? And, not least, will the Sandinista party and its broad majority of followers accept a peaceful change of power? After all, the fear of a repetition of the country’s violent past or political chaos is still tangible.

Concerning the international community, a government change will most likely re-attract foreign donors and new interests. The question remains whether these will learn from past mistakes and put aside their own interests to place cooperation on a new footing – promoting sustainable and equitable growth and enabling CSOs to prosper without depriving them of their original features and objectives.

Finally, with a view to the Nicaraguan CSO sector, the findings have shown that its potential to challenge the status quo under the present political conditions seems to be marginal, due to the isolation (critical opposition), the party-political polarization (satellites), or neutralization (service providers) of its most important pillars. Nonetheless, the sector’s role also largely depends on the contextual developments in the next years. If the critical opposition is able to recover under a different government and able to re-integrate into society, they may regain their role as a driving force for the anchorage and realization of democratic values. The service providers, on the other side, would have to manage to re-shape their configuration, gain more autonomy from their donors’ interests and strengthen their ties to the population. With their socio-economic work, they could then contribute to strengthen the socio-economic foundations of democracy. And, last but not least, a central question concerns the satellites and their reaction in case of a government change. While a sudden shortfall of financial and ideational support will most likely lead to their decline, will the remaining structures and organizations manage to recon-
figure and re-open for non-party members? The existing local infrastructure of participation and civic engagement could finally build a third pillar for the further promotion of democratic consolidation.

In closing, the present context seems to distort and restrain, if not destroy CSOs in Nicaragua. Changing frame conditions could revitalize the sector’s potential to challenge the status quo and promote democratic change.
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II.1 Literature


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