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The Role of Civil Society in the Strategic Partnership Between Brazil and the EU

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Abstract. The relevance of the topic stems from the growing role of civil society as a key actor in shaping bilateral relations between Brazil and the European Union (EU). In the context of global challenges, ranging from human rights protection to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, cooperation between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-profit associations is gaining strategic importance, while remaining insufficiently studied in the scientific literature. It is especially important to understand how civil society influences foreign policy decision-making, including the complex processes such as negotiations on the EU — MERCOSUR agreement. The study uses an institutional and systematic approach complemented by historical and political analysis. Methods of comparative analysis, generalization of statistical data (including that from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, IBGE), as well as the qualitative analysis of policy documents, reports and public statements from civil society organizations and EU institutions are used. The scientific novelty of the work lies in the comprehensive consideration of the interaction between Brazilian and EU civil societies as an independent level of international partnership. For the first time in the Russian scientific researches, the mechanisms of influence of NGOs on Brazil's foreign policy have been analyzed in such detail, including their role in suspending the ratification of the trade agreement with the EU, and cyclical dependencies between the domestic political situation and the level of activity of the civil sector have been identified. The results of the study demonstrate that Brazilian civil society not only engages in dialogue with European partners through such formats as the EU — Brazil Round Table, but is also able to influence the country's foreign policy course. While EU support strengthens democratic institutions and promotes a "green transition," there is also a risk of NGOs being used for external interference. In conclusion, it is emphasized that a sustainable partnership between Brazil and the EU is impossible without the involvement of civil society, which is both a resource for cooperation and a potential source of tension.

Key words: non-governmental organizations, sustainable development, EU — Brazil Round Table, partnership asymmetry, shared values

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Роль гражданского общества в стратегическом партнерстве Бразилии и Европейского союза

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Аннотация. Актуальность темы исследования обусловлена растущей ролью гражданского общества как ключевого актора в формировании двусторонних отношений между Бразилией и Европейским союзом (ЕС). В условиях глобальных вызовов — от защиты прав человека до реализации целей устойчивого развития — сотрудничество неправительственных организаций (НПО) и некоммерческих объединений приобретает стратегическое значение, оставаясь при этом недостаточно изученным в научной литературе. Необходимо установить, как гражданское общество влияет на принятие внешнеполитических решений, включая такие сложные процессы, как переговоры по соглашению ЕС — Южноамериканский общий рынок (МЕРКОСУР). Теоретико-методологическую основу исследования составили институциональный и системный подходы, дополненные историко-политологическим анализом. Используются методы сравнительного анализа, обобщения статистических данных (в том числе Института географии и статистики Бразилии, IBGE), а также качественного анализа программных документов, отчетов и публичных заявлений гражданских организаций и институтов ЕС. Научная новизна работы заключается в комплексном рассмотрении взаимодействия гражданских обществ Бразилии и ЕС как самостоятельного уровня международного партнерства. Впервые в российской литературе детально проанализированы механизмы влияния НПО на внешнюю политику Бразилии, включая их роль в приостановке ратификации торгового соглашения с ЕС, а также выявлены циклические зависимости между внутриполитической конъюнктурой и уровнем активности гражданского сектора. Результаты исследования подтверждают, что гражданское общество Бразилии не только участвует в диалоге с европейскими партнерами через такие форматы, как Круглый стол ЕС — Бразилия, но и способно влиять на внешнеполитический курс страны. Поддержка со стороны ЕС усиливает демократические институты и способствует «зеленому переходу», однако существует и обратный риск — инструментализация НПО в целях внешнего вмешательства. В заключение подчеркивается, что устойчивое партнерство между Бразилией и ЕС невозможно без вовлечения гражданского общества, которое выступает одновременно ресурсом сотрудничества и потенциальным источником напряженности.

Ключевые слова: неправительственные организации, устойчивое развитие, Круглый стол ЕС — Бразилия, асимметрия партнерства, общие ценности

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) and the Federative Republic of Brazil have developed a long-standing and productive cooperation encompassing a wide range of areas and shared interests. Contacts are expanding in the sphere of humanitarian challenges, particularly with regard to environmental protection, including the United Nations Sustainable Development

Goals (SDGs), educational development, the enhancement of research and development capacities, and civil society dialogue across the region. The EU is seeking to expand its relations with all countries in Latin America, and this cooperation takes place at a multilateral level, covering economic, political, and social dimensions. Engaging with civil society plays a crucial role in advancing partnerships and facilitating the exchange of experience.

EU — Brazil relations are comprehensive and mutually beneficial, underscoring their significance and future potential.

Civil society in Brazil takes diverse forms of social and political citizen engagement. These include non-governmental (NGOs) and non-commercial organizations (NCOs), as well as foundations, trade unions, and educational associations. Year by year, civic organizations are assuming a more active role in the nation's public life, exerting influence on its socio-political landscape. The present study focuses primarily on the role of NGOs and NCOs in fostering relations between Brazil and the EU.

The aim of this research is to identify the stages in the evolution of active civil society participation by South American countries in addressing domestic and foreign policy challenges, using Brazil — EU civil society cooperation as a case study.

The study's methodology is based on Ralf Dahrendorf's approach, who examined civic associations and provided his own definition of this phenomenon. According to Dahrendorf (2002), civil society is "the fabric of people's shared life, which does not require the state for its existence (or, more precisely, does not depend on state support to avoid 'the inconveniences of the state of nature'). Civil society arises from bottom-up initiatives and associations — so numerous that the rights of minorities are not threatened by monopolistic claims from other minorities or by tendencies within the majority." Additionally, the theoretical and methodological framework draws on the works of John Keane (1998), who analyzed civil society as a form of critical inquiry into the role of civic associations in modern democratic states. Moreover, the methodological foundation of this study also incorporates the approach of Russian scholars N.A. Kolesnikova and E.V. Ryabova, who examine civil society through the lenses of history and philosophy (Kolesnikova & Ryabova, 2016, pp. 28–31).

To systematically investigate the role of civil societies within the Brazil — EU strategic

partnership dynamics, this research combines a systemic approach with traditional synthesis of factual material.

Russian academic literature has addressed various aspects of NGO and NCO activities in Latin America. For instance, E.E. Kuznetsova explored issues of social policy, analyzing the changing role of the state in the social sphere and new approaches to resolving social challenges (Kuznetsova, 2012). A.A. Malashenkova and O.G. Kharitonova examined levels of civic participation in democratic Latin American countries (Malashenkova & Kharitonova, 2022, pp. 247–252), while L.V. Diakova studied the activities of major non-governmental organizations in the social sector and the implementation of multicultural policies (Diakova, 2022, pp. 7–13). L.A. Gainutdinova investigated the emergence of civil society and the nature of its relationship with the state (Gainutdinova, 2009).

Scholars specializing in EU — Latin America cooperation on political, social, and economic dimensions include A.A. Kanunnikov (2021) and V.M. Tayar (2018; 2020; 2022).

EU — Brazil relations are comprehensive and mutually beneficial, highlighting their importance and long-term promise. Already in the 2000s, systematic bilateral dialogue began taking shape, including the establishment of a strategic partnership framework (Borzova, 2013). Multidimensional analysis of the interactions between the European Union — as the most successful integration project of the Old World — and active civil society actors in Latin America has gained particular relevance in today's global context. The EU is consistently expanding its donor programs supporting NGOs and NCOs worldwide, accompanied by rising budgetary allocations for such initiatives. By 2027, EU financial bodies have earmarked over EUR 1.6 billion to strengthen civil society beyond the EU's borders. The primary instrument for disbursing these funds is the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR); however, total European support for civil organizations through other funding

channels significantly exceeds this amount of grant assistance.¹

Understanding this dynamic and establishing a sustained dialogue with broad civil society groups in Latin America can enhance the effectiveness of implementing bilateral agreements and strengthen the partnership between the regions.

Civil Society Cooperation between Latin America and the EU

During the first two decades of the 21st century, civil societies in many Latin American countries significantly strengthened their influence over political and social processes. NGOs actively participate in economic and political debates, advocating their positions both in domestic and foreign policy (Lage & Brant, 2008).

The development and number of NCOs and NGOs across different countries is influenced by factors such as the maturity of democratic institutions, levels of economic development, societal and governmental stability, and the degree of social tension — this is evidenced by civil society research, including works by B. Wampler and L. Avritzer focused on Brazil. Today, most of these organizations operate independently of the state and autonomously define their goals and strategic directions (Wampler & Avritzer, 2004).

Over the past 20 years, ties between civil societies in Europe and South America have substantially deepened. This strengthening is driven by a growing interest in shared

values such as democracy, enhanced civic oversight of public policy, human rights and freedoms, and the environmental agenda. These issues are especially salient in Latin America, where authoritarian regimes predominated just half a century ago (Kanunnikov, 2016, pp. 92–96).

Latin America is interested in learning from the EU's experience in areas such as science, technology, economic policy, labor standards, and state — civil society engagement. The EU fosters cooperation with the region based on shared values. These developments are thoroughly examined in monographic studies by Russian scholars (Kanunnikov, 2014). A prominent example of transnational cooperation is the work of the NGO Plan International,² operating in 75 countries, including Brazil, and focused on supporting vulnerable populations. The evolution of the civil sector in Europe has enabled the expansion of interaction format: currently, humanitarian initiatives in the region can be implemented not only by EU structures, but also by independent European NGOs.

Other significant actors include the Friedrich Ebert Foundation,³ which implements projects in Brazil in five key areas: democracy, sustainable development, security, and the economy and youth education.⁴ The Konrad Adenauer Foundation⁵ has been operating in the country since 1969, promoting European values in domestic and foreign policy.⁶ The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation⁷ together with the Brazilian

¹ World NGO Day: Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell // The Diplomatic Service of the European Union. February 26, 2020. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/world-ngo-day-statement-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-2_en (accessed: 02.02.2024).

² About Plan International // Plan International. URL: <https://plan-international.org/about/> (accessed: 28.02.2024).

³ The Friedrich Ebert Foundation has been recognized as an undesirable organization in the Russian Federation (*Editor's note*).

⁴ FES Brasil // Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. URL: <https://brasil.fes.de/quem-somos/fes-brasil> (accessed: 16.02.2024).

⁵ Konrad Adenauer Foundation is recognized as an undesirable organization in the territory of the Russian Federation (*Editor's note*).

⁶ Our Work in Brazil // Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. URL: <https://www.kas.de/en/web/brasilien/unsere-arbeit-in-brasilien> (accessed: 16.02.2024).

⁷ The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is recognized as an undesirable organization in the territory of the Russian Federation (*Editor's note*).

Institute of Energy and Environment, he developed recommendations on the “green transition” of the automotive industry.⁸ For German NGOs, Latin America, and especially Brazil, has become an important platform for promoting EU values and forming partnerships with local civil society.

The European Union is developing its cooperation with the region based on shared values, paying special attention to supporting NGOs in the fields of human rights, governance, energy, ecology, education and culture.⁹ The EU underlines the importance of the rule of law and democracy by using its delegations in Latin American countries, which maintain a dialogue with local organizations.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is consolidating its ties with civil society in the region, including through the Brazilian Council for Economic and Social Development, where key internal and external challenges are discussed.¹⁰ The establishment of sustained dialogue mechanisms between civil societies of the EU and Latin America has become an integral part of the European Economic and Social Committee’s strategy. The active engagement of civil sector is regarded as a necessary condition for implementing bilateral initiatives. In 2015, both the EU and most Latin American countries endorsed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on climate change (Davydov, 2019, pp. 112–136), providing additional momentum to the “green” agenda in the region.

The EU aims to ensure that its partnership with Latin America remains meaningful for

local communities. To this end, the EESC incorporates provisions on NGO cooperation into official documents, and EU delegations on the ground support practical collaboration. Where necessary, the EESC also facilitates the creation of civil governance institutions. This approach has already yielded results: the dialogue format involving Brazilian civil society has become a model for expanding partnerships with other countries in the region.¹¹ For the EU, this not only accelerates relationship-building but also establishes a foundation for implementing “soft power” policies through support for local NGOs.

Another significant example is the “EU — Andean Community” forum held in Brussels in 2005. Participants discussed environmental protection, social inequality, democracy, and human rights. The forum’s success led to the launch in 2007 of the program “Strengthening Civil Society in the Andean Community Countries” (Kanunnikov, 2021, pp. 8–10).

Thus, the EU’s targeted support for Latin American civil society has enabled it to strengthen its position in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region and effectively advance its foreign policy interests through a sustainable, values-based partnership.

Influence of Brazilian Civil Society on the Country’ Regional Policy: Dynamics of Relations with the EU and Internal Political Turbulence

Non-governmental and non-profit organizations that form civil society have a direct impact on both Brazil’s domestic policy and its foreign policy course.

⁸ The Brazilian Automotive Industry Transition. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. April, 2021 // IEMA. URL: https://energiaeambiente.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/eng_RosaLuxemburgFoundation_IEMA.pdf (accessed: 16.02.2024).

⁹ Promotion of Trade and Sustainable Agenda in Brazil and the European Union MERCOSUR Association Agreement // The Diplomatic Service of the European Union. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/1.2.cds_ue_relatorio_englishversion.pdf (accessed: 08.02.2024).

¹⁰ The Economic and Social Development Council (CDES) // Gestão de Conteúdo. URL: https://gestaoconteudo.presidencia.gov.br/gestao_cdes/en/the-council/about (accessed: 05.02.2024).

¹¹ Haider W., Batalla I. Revisiting Bi-Regional Relations: The EU — Latin American Dialogue and Diversification of Interregional Cooperation. Hamburg : EU — LAC Foundation, 2020. URL: https://epub.sub.uni-hamburg.de/epub/volltexte/2021/123961/pdf/web_version_revisiting_relations_eu_lac_dialogue_end.pdf (accessed: 05.02.2024).

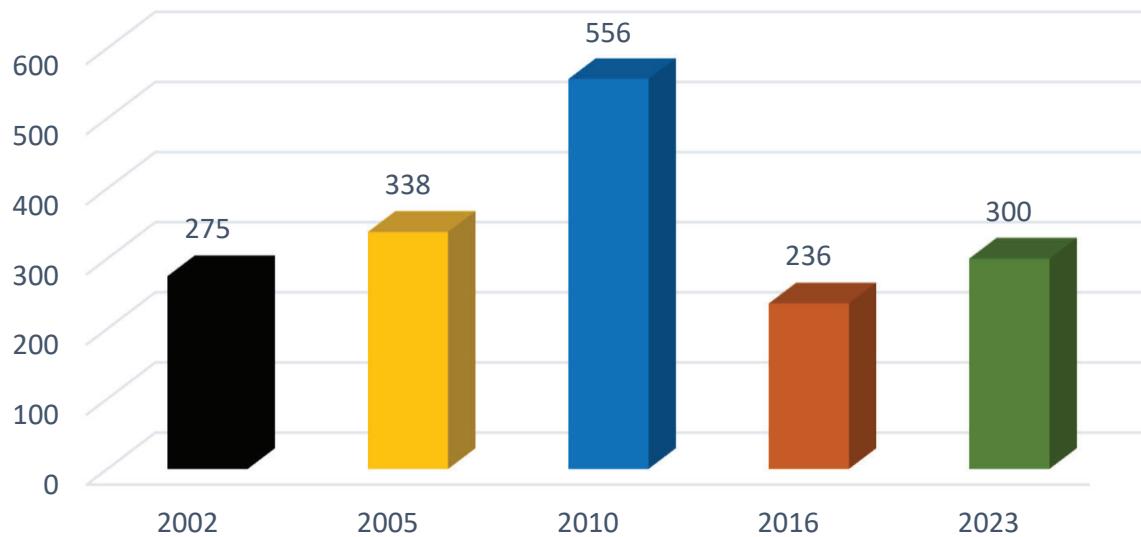


Figure 1. Total Number of NCOs and NGOs in Brazil, in thousands

Source: compiled by V.S. Olkhovskaia based on: FASFIL — Private Foundations and Non-Profit Associations in Brazil // Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. URL: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/en/statistics/economic/other-economic-statistics/17153-private-foundations-and-non-profit-associations-in-brazil.html?edicao=24170&t=destaques> (accessed: 28.02.2024).

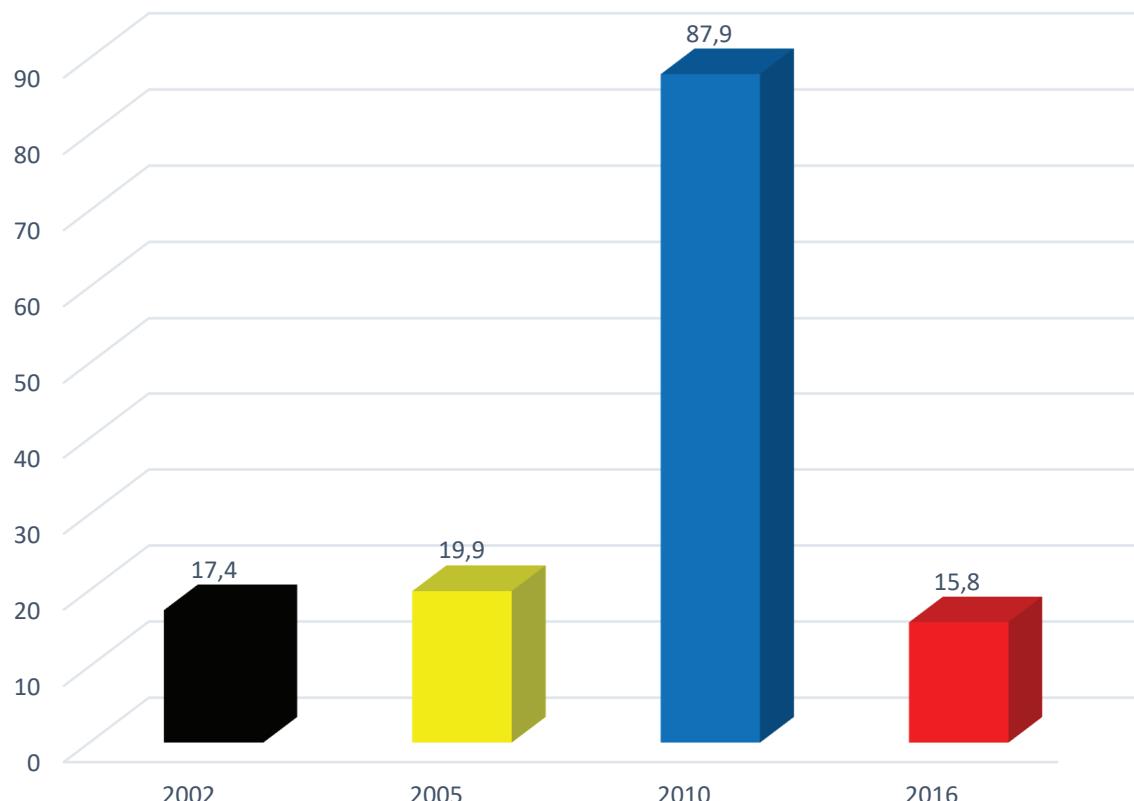


Figure 2a. Number of NCOs and NGOs in the Field of Education and Science, in thousands

Source: compiled by V.S. Olkhovskaia based on: FASFIL — Private Foundations and Non-Profit Associations in Brazil // Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. URL: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/en/statistics/economic/other-economic-statistics/17153-private-foundations-and-non-profit-associations-in-brazil.html?edicao=24170&t=destaques> (accessed: 28.02.2024).

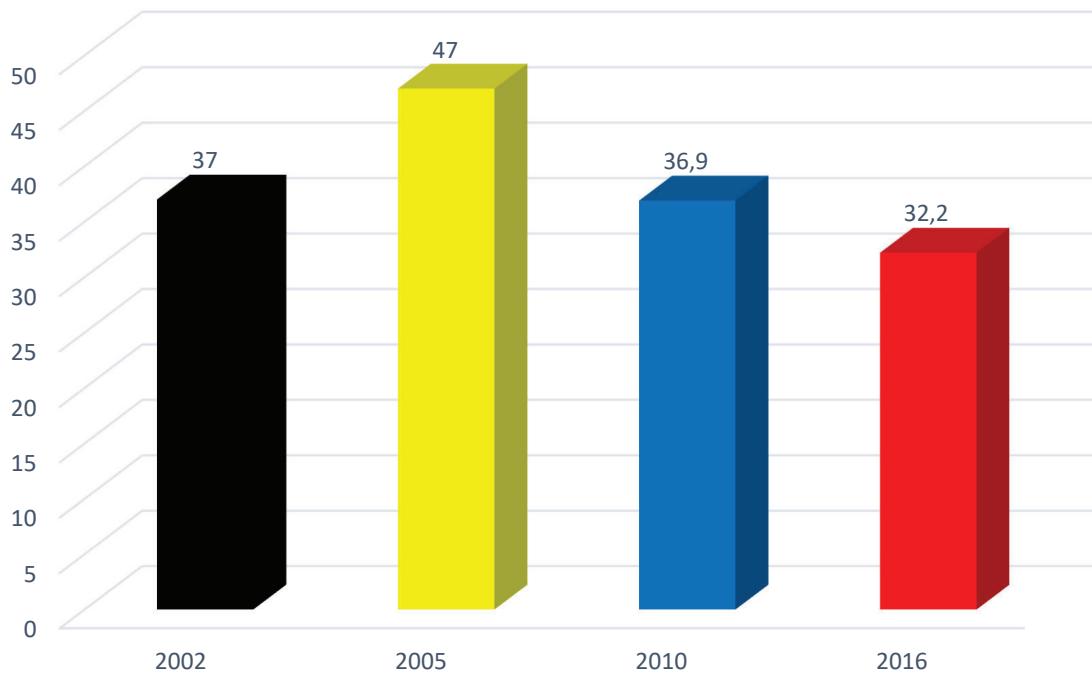


Figure 2b. Number of NCOs and NGOs in the Field of Culture and Entertainment, in thousands

Source: compiled by V.S. Olkhovskaia based on: FASFIL — Private Foundations and Non-Profit Associations in Brazil // Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. URL: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/en/statistics/economic/other-economic-statistics/17153-private-foundations-and-non-profit-associations-in-brazil.html?edicao=24170&t=destaques> (accessed: 28.02.2024).

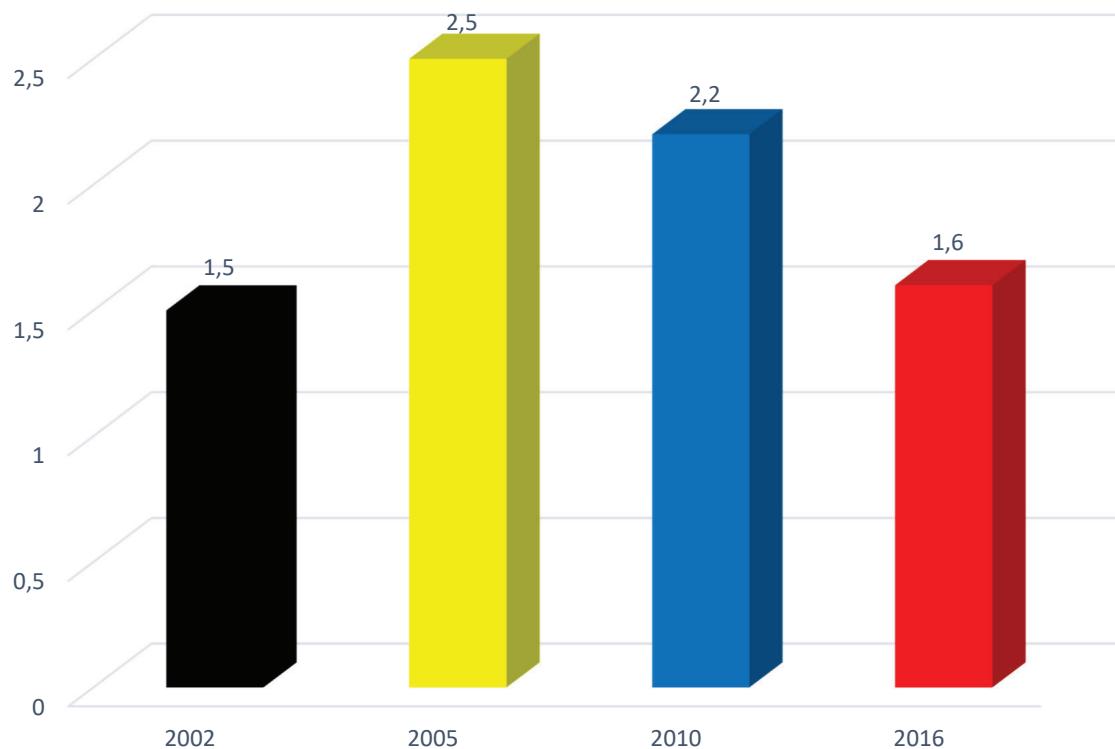


Figure 2c. Number of NCOs and NGOs in the Field of Environmental Protection and Animal Welfare, in thousands

Source: compiled by V.S. Olkhovskaia based on: FASFIL — Private Foundations and Non-Profit Associations in Brazil // Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. URL: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/en/statistics/economic/other-economic-statistics/17153-private-foundations-and-non-profit-associations-in-brazil.html?edicao=24170&t=destaques> (accessed: 28.02.2024).

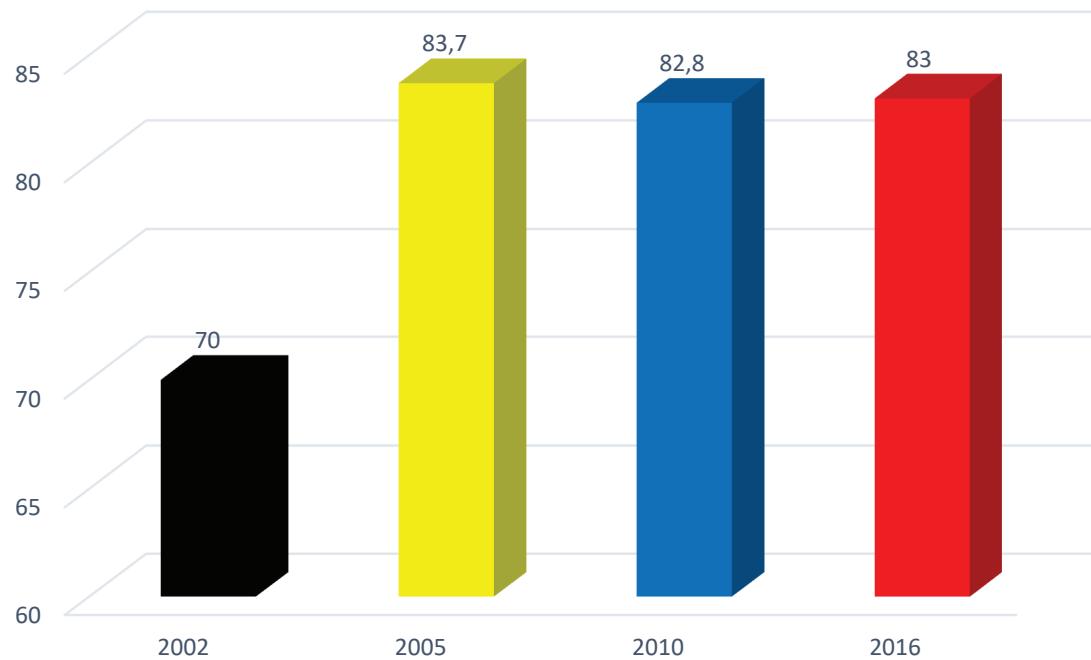


Figure 2d. Number of NCOs and NGOs in the Field of Religion, in thousands

Source: compiled by V.S. Olkhovskaia based on: FASFIL — Private Foundations and Non-Profit Associations in Brazil // Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. URL: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/en/statistics/economic/other-economic-statistics/17153-private-foundations-and-non-profit-associations-in-brazil.html?edicao=24170&t=destaques> (accessed: 28.02.2024).

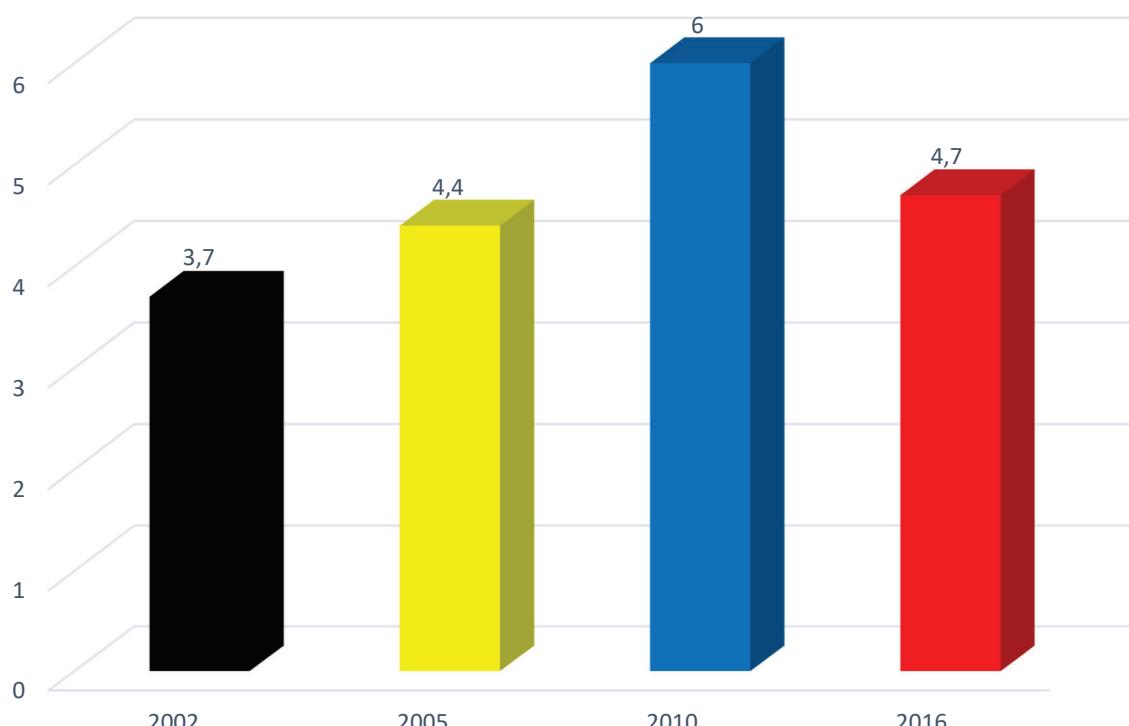


Figure 2e. Number of NCOs and NGOs in the Healthcare Sector, in thousands

Source: compiled by V.S. Olkhovskaia based on: FASFIL — Private Foundations and Non-Profit Associations in Brazil // Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. URL: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/en/statistics/economic/other-economic-statistics/17153-private-foundations-and-non-profit-associations-in-brazil.html?edicao=24170&t=destaques> (accessed: 28.02.2024).

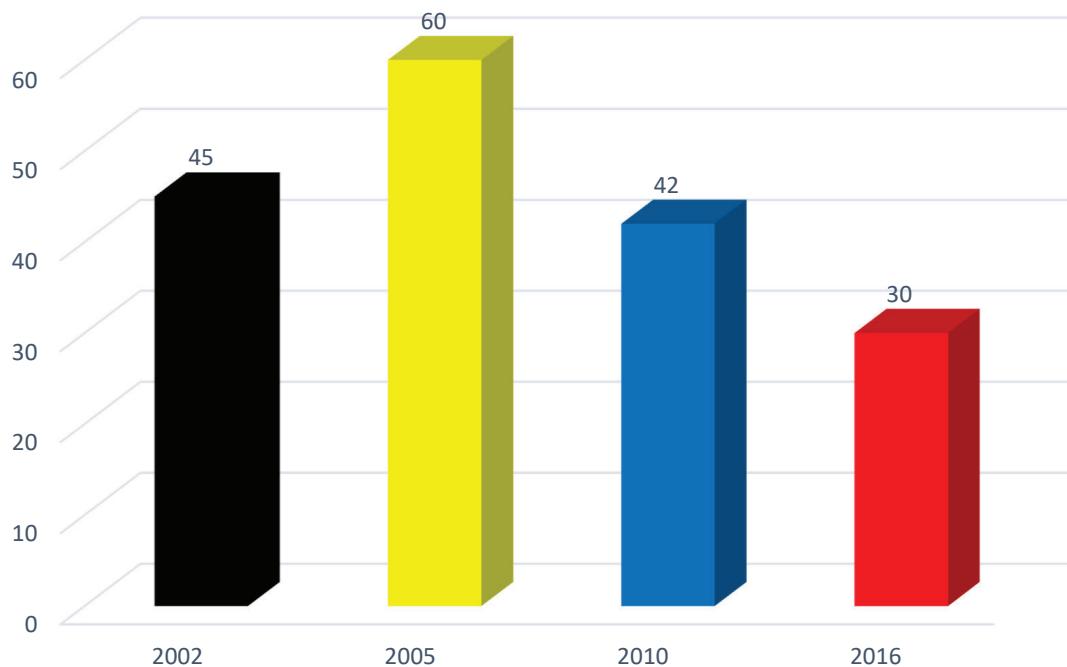


Figure 2f. Number of NCOs and NGOs in the Field of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms, in thousands

Source: compiled by V.S. Olkhovskaia based on: FASFIL — Private Foundations and Non-Profit Associations in Brazil // Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. URL: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/en/statistics/economic/other-economic-statistics/17153-private-foundations-and-non-profit-associations-in-brazil.html?edicao=24170&t=destaques> (accessed: 28.02.2024).

An analysis of data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) for the period 2002–2016 (Figure 1) reveals a clear correlation between the policies of administrative authorities, the level of freedom of speech and the number of registered NGOs and NPOs. During the presidency of L.I. Lula da Silva (2003–2010), who continued F. Cardoso's democratization and social policies, the number of civil organizations increased dramatically: in 2005 alone — by 21 % compared with 2002. By 2010, their total number increased by more than 100 % (by 281 thousand organizations) (Figure 2a–2e). The growth is especially noticeable in the field of healthcare (Figure 2d) (+62 %), as well as in education and science (Figure 2a) (4.5 times). Such a policy strengthened the international image of Brazilian democracy and contributed to the expansion of partnership with Europe (Barbosa, 2007). After Dilma Rousseff came to power (2011–2016), support for the civil sector weakened, and the corruption

scandal in 2016, which led to her impeachment,¹² accelerated the “right turn” in the country. Against this backdrop, state funding for NGOs sharply declined: by 2016, the number of registered organizations had more than halved. For instance, the number of educational and scientific NCOs dropped from 88,000 (in 2010) to 16,000 (in 2016). Under Michel Temer, who assumed the presidency in 2016, Brazil entered an era of conservative administrations that redirected the country's foreign policy toward the United States. The government began restricting civil society activities: the number of human rights organizations decreased by 18,000, environmental organizations fell by 29 % compared to 2010 (and by 50 % relative to 2005), and health-related organizations declined by 27 %.

Although official statistics for the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) have not yet been published, clear centrifugal trends are evident. His administration weakened environmental legislation, resulting in a sharp 54 % increase

¹² Protests Against Government Corruption Gain Momentum in Brazil // TASS. March 18, 2016. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/2750824> (accessed: 28.02.2024).

in Amazon deforestation in 2020 compared to 2019. Policies affecting Indigenous peoples, including the freeze on land demarcation, sparked widespread protests. Organizations such as the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and homeless workers' groups were labeled "terrorist," intensifying confrontation between the authorities and civil society (Kanunnikov, 2020, pp. 48–49). Censorship of NGOs also became more prevalent.

Civil society's influence was also evident on the international stage. In 2019, on the eve of the conclusion of the EU—MERCOSUR trade agreement negotiations, over 340 organizations issued an open letter calling for the deal to be suspended due to the deteriorating human rights and environmental situation in Brazil.¹³ Supported by French President Emmanuel Macron,¹⁴ this pressure led to the de facto suspension of the ratification of the agreement.

Negotiations only resumed after L.I. Lula da Silva returned to power. With his re-election in 2022, a return to a policy of openness and support for the civil sector was initiated. Based on available data, the number of NGOs and non-profit organisations has risen to 300,000, representing an increase of 7.8% in total by 2023 compared with 2021.¹⁵ The support of civil society was one of the key factors in the victory of L.I. Lula da Silva. Civil society played a significant role in mobilizing support for the elections, thus becoming one of the pillars of the new president's political strategy. The new administration has announced its intention to involve the population in decision-making and to step up public investment in healthcare, education, labor rights protection

and environmental protection. In this context, religious non-profit organizations also retain a significant role; their number has remained stable at around 70,000–80,000 since the early 2000s.¹⁶ This is despite a general trend in society towards a decrease in the proportion of Catholics, an increase in the number of followers of evangelical movements and an increase in the number of people who do not identify with any religion. At the same time, representatives of both center-left and conservative governments have continued to provide various forms of support to religious NGOs over the years.

In general, center-left administrations sought to develop civil society, engage it in dialogue with European partners, and expand government participation, while right-wing cabinets cut funding, limited NGO independence, and introduced direct censorship. These trends were most pronounced during the presidency of J. Bolsonaro (2019–2022).

Cooperation between NGOs and NGOs in Brazil and the EU: Difficulties and Prospects

The relationship between the EU and Brazil is based on multi-level interactions involving not only state actors, but also non-state actors. Civil society institutions play a key role in strengthening socio-economic partnership and promoting regional integration. Despite the differences in the historical and cultural context, the parties are developing a dialogue at the national, sub-regional and regional levels. There are over 300,000 non-governmental organizations

¹³ Open Letter. Subject: 340+ Organisations Call on the EU to Immediately Halt Trade Negotiations with Brazil. June 17, 2019 // European Trade Justice Movement. URL: <https://europeantradejustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Joint-letter-Brazil-EU-Mercosur.pdf> (accessed: 14.11.2025).

¹⁴ Gonzales J. World's Biggest Trade Deal in Trouble over EU Anger at Brazil Deforestation // Mongabay. July 6, 2020. URL: <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/07/worlds-biggest-trade-deal-in-trouble-over-eu-anger-at-brazil-deforestation/> (accessed: 14.11.2025).

¹⁵ Número de OSCs no Brasil cresce 7,8% entre 2021 e 2023 // Associação Brasileira de Captadores de Recursos. 21 de maio de 2024. URL: <https://captadores.org.br/noticias/numero-de-oscs-no-brasil-cresce-78-entre-2021-e-2023/> (accessed: 14.11.2024).

¹⁶ FASFIL — Private Foundations and Non-Profit Associations in Brazil // Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. URL: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/en/statistics/economic/other-economic-statistics/17153-private-foundations-and-non-profit-associations-in-brazil.html?edicao=24170&t=destaques> (accessed: 28.02.2024).

operating in Brazil,¹⁷ solving social and political problems, introducing innovations, participating in international initiatives and influencing the response to regional and global challenges. These NGOs are funded through the state budget, private donations and foreign investments, including those from the EU, one of the country's key partners. As already mentioned, the cooperation is based on common values in the domains of democracy, sustainable development and human rights. The EU Delegation to Brazil conducts a structured dialogue with civil society, both directly and with the support of the authorities.

Since 2007, a special fund has been operating to support sectoral cooperation between the EU and Brazil, aimed at developing a strategic partnership through equal business interaction and technology exchange, as well as strengthening political and technical dialogue on mutually significant topics. Already in the 2008 Joint Action Plan, the parties stated their intention to expand the interaction of civil societies through regular consultations and round tables within the framework of the bilateral institutional architecture.¹⁸

One such project is the Round Table of representatives of civil society in Brazil and the European Union, which has been running since 2009. Its direct beneficiaries are the Brazilian Council for Economic and Social Development and the European Economic and Social Committee.¹⁹ The EU — Brazil Civil Society Round Table is a mechanism for regular consultations to expand and streamline civil society intervention within the framework of the existing Strategic Partnership

and political dialogue between the parties, and is also part of the institutional architecture of the EU — Brazil Strategic Partnership. The Permanent Dialogue Forum on Civil Society Issues is responsible for the preparation of analyses and recommendations that are discussed at the summits of the heads of state of both sides.

The Round Table meets twice a year, subsequently transmitting its recommendations to the European institutions and the Brazilian government for consideration at the Heads of State Summit. The organization of the Round Table is regulated by a system of joint chairmanship between the partners. The agenda of the Europe-Brazil Round Table includes multisectoral challenges both in the field of joint integration and interaction, as well as issues of a global foreign policy nature, such as the environment and energy.²⁰

The EU — Brazil Civil Society Round Table has been instrumental in providing a stable foundation for regular meetings and the exchange of perspectives on topics considered in the context of the Strategic Partnership. The issues on the agenda are closely linked to the topics discussed by the leaders of the EU and Brazil at the summit meetings and recorded in joint statements following the events.

At the first Round Table meetings in 2011–2012, the parties worked on the issues of preparation for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development Rio+20,²¹ they also developed guidelines for action within the framework of 30 industry dialogues covering, in particular, human rights, science and technology.²²

¹⁷ What is NGO in Brazil? // Road less Traveled Store. URL: <https://www.roadlesstraveledstore.com/what-is-ngo-in-brazil/> (accessed: 22.02.2024).

¹⁸ Joint Action Plan. Brazil — European Union Strategic Partnership Joint Action Plan // Delegation of the European Union to Brazil. January 14, 2009. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/brazil/joint-action-plan_en?s=191 (accessed: 07.02.2024).

¹⁹ Roundtable Meeting of the Civil Societies of Brazil and the European Union // Sector Dialogues. European Union — Brazil. URL: <https://eubrdialogues.com/projects/reunio-da-mesa-redonda-das-sociedades-civis-do-brasil-e-da-unio-europeia> (accessed: 10.02.2024).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Reunião da Mesa-Redonda da sociedade civil UE — Brasil. Porto, 7–9 de Novembro de 2011 // Federação das Associações de Desenvolvimento Local em Portugal. URL: https://www.minhaterra.pt/wst/files/11_11_15_Final_declaration_V_RT_EU-BR_PT.pdf (accessed: 10.02.2024).

²² CDES entrega parecer da sociedade civil sobre desenvolvimento sustentável a Chefes de Estado // CBIC. 25 enero 2013. URL: <https://cbic.org.br/cdes-entrega-parecer-da-sociedade-civil-sobre-desenvolvimento-sustentavel-a-chefes-de-estado/> (accessed: 11.02.2024).

In 2014, EU federal officials, along with representatives of Brazil in the field of civil society organizations, participated in the II International Seminar on the Regulatory Framework for Civil Society Organizations,²³ organized under the EU — Brazil Sectoral Dialogue Support Project and aimed at discussing tools for the dissemination and improvement of legal instruments, public policies and strategies for establishing a regulatory framework. Additionally, it sought to deepen knowledge about the mechanisms of cooperation and regulation governing the joint initiatives of NGOs of the two sides.

In November 2020, an EU — Brazil civil society workshop was held on the basis of the Round Table, where representatives of civil societies from the EU and Brazil met and reviewed the current situation and best practices in the field of human rights in Brazil and the EU.²⁴ The discussions evidenced the commitment of both sides to further promote and strengthen human rights domestically and internationally, based on their shared views and values.

In 2020, the European Union launched a new initiative to support active segments of the Brazilian population within the framework of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. The purpose of this program is to assist civil society organizations working to overcome social injustice and strengthen democratic institutions, in particular human rights structures in Brazil.²⁵

The program constitutes a competitive process for the allocation of grants and financing to non-governmental and public organizations in Brazil, with a total budget of 2.6 million euros, in two key areas.

The first area is the protection of the rights and freedoms of Brazil's indigenous peoples. Among the Brazilian civil society organizations specializing in protecting the interests of the indigenous population and interacting with European civil society institutions, it is worth noting such a strategically important structure as the Association of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (*A Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil*, APIB), which promotes the rights of indigenous peoples, the development of media discourse and raises awareness of the need to preserve their traditional lands. The APIB²⁶ includes smaller local associations that are actively involved in protecting the rights of indigenous communities, such as the Association of the Indigenous Peoples of the Northeast, Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo (APOINME), the Council of the Terena People, the Association of Indigenous Peoples (ARPINSUDESTE), the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the South (ARPINSUL), the Grand Council of the People Guarani (ATY GUSU), the Coordination of the Organizations of the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon of Brazil (COIAB) and the Iwirup Guarani Commission. The second area of cooperation between the EU and Brazil in the field of NGOs and NCOs is the financing of projects of Brazilian civil society organizations in the field of human rights protection: support for human rights defenders and civil society organizations that work on issues related to human rights violations and attacks on fundamental freedoms in Brazil (financing of any of the projects from the second area is possible for the amount of a grant in the range from 800,000 to 1,000,000 euros).²⁷

²³ II Seminário Internacional do Marco Regulatório das Organizações da Sociedade Civil // Diálogos. União Europeia — Brasil. URL: <https://eubrdialogues.com/proyecto.php/ii-seminario-internacional-do-marco-regulatorio-das-organizaes-da-sociedade-civil?url=ii-seminario-internacional-do-marco-regulatorio-das-organizaes-da-sociedade-civil> (accessed: 14.02.2024).

²⁴ 9th EU — Brazil Human Rights Dialogue // The Diplomatic Service of the European Union. December 2, 2020. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/9th-eu-brazil-human-rights-dialogue_en (accessed: 13.02.2024).

²⁵ EU Announces European Instrument for the Promotion of Democracy and Human Rights (Brazil) // Grants and Resources for Sustainability. March 3, 2020. URL: <https://www2.fundsforgos.org/latest-funds-for-ngos/eu-announces-european-instrument-for-the-promotion-of-democracy-and-human-rights-brazil/> (accessed: 14.02.2024).

²⁶ Sobre a APIB // Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil (APIB). URL: <https://apioboficial.org/sobre/> (accessed: 14.11.2025).

²⁷ Ibid.

The EU Delegation to Brazil also regularly encourages youth organizations to participate in its consultations and cooperation events. At the moment, the EU Delegation to Brazil is working on establishing a new council to promote cooperation between EU — Brazil youth civil society organizations, taking into account the successful experience of setting up a Youth Council under the Commissioner and the Directorate General for International Partnership.²⁸

At the end of 2022, representatives of one of the most influential civil society organizations in Brazil (*Conectas Direitos Humanos*, the Black Coalition for Rights in Brazil (*Coalizão Negra por Direitos*), Article 19 (*Artigo 19*), the Arns Commission (*Comissão Arns*)) paid a visit to the European Union, where they met with the main representatives of European politics, both at the level of the European integration bloc and in an international format. In particular, fruitful contacts were established with the European Parliament and with representatives of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The agenda of the European tour of Brazilian organizations was based around the problem of increasing political violence in Brazil during the election period. With the presence of several organizations representing Brazilian civil society, the delegation in Europe sought to increase the international support network for the results of the 2022 general elections and establish a foundation for their international recognition.²⁹

It is also important to address the issue of assessing EU — Brazil civil society cooperation. Brazilian NGOs often discuss the need to create a more equitable framework for cooperation between Europe and Brazil, in particular, to reduce the “inequality

of relations.” Brazilian civil society organizations are concerned about EU expansion in Brazil in the fields of culture, politics and economics. This problem of strategic partnership asymmetry is analyzed in detail in the works of a number of Latin American researchers (Saravia, 2014). The civil societies of the republic emphasize that in expanding partnership with the EU, it is necessary to take into account the “asymmetric” format of relations, and warn the Government of the republic against the risks of strengthening contacts in the modern format of cooperation. Brazilian civil society organizations fear EU expansion in Brazil in the fields of culture, politics and economics.³⁰ The main purpose of the discussion of NGOs in the Republic in this area is the desire to create a springboard for rethinking relations and uniting on fair terms. It seems that despite the difficulties, there is a positive trend in cooperation between the EU and Brazil through civil societies, and the coming to power of Lula da Silva will accelerate centripetal processes in this format of cooperation, thereby expanding the multi-vector format of relations between the EU and Brazil.

Conclusion

The nature of cooperation between the European Union and Brazil is becoming increasingly multifaceted, encompassing politics, trade (including negotiations on the EU — MERCOSUR agreement), environmental protection, and responses to global challenges. Civil society institutions play a pivotal role in this process. Interaction occurs across multiple levels, from national to regional, and is supported by structures such as the European Economic and Social Committee

²⁸ The European Union and Brazil — Civil Society // Delegation of the European Union to Brazil. August 2, 2021. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/brazil/european-union-and-brazil-civil-society_en?s=191 (accessed: 15.02.2024).

²⁹ Brazilian Organizations Visit European Union to Denounce Bolsonaro’s Attacks on Electoral System // Conectas Direitos Humanos. August 9, 2022. URL: <https://www.conectas.org/en/noticias/brazilian-organizations-visit-european-union-to-denounce-bolsonaros-attacks-on-electoral-system/> (accessed: 18.02.2024).

³⁰ Open Letter. Subject: 340+ Organisations Call on the EU to Immediately Halt Trade Negotiations with Brazil. June 17, 2019 // European Trade Justice Movement. URL: <https://europeantradejustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Joint-letter-Brazil-EU-Mercosur.pdf> (accessed: 14.11.2025).

(EESC), which has been working with Latin American NGOs since the late 1980s. Despite political turbulence in the region and interstate disagreements, civil society dialogue remains resilient and productive, grounded in shared values and network-based initiatives.

The future prospects of this cooperation depend on three main directions: first, deepening experience-sharing through formats such as the EU — Brazil Round Table, particularly in the fields of human rights, sustainable development, and environmental protection; second, expanding

joint projects backed by European funding; third, leveraging civil society as a legitimate channel to shape public perceptions of integration processes.

At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge the associated risks: contradictions between state policies and NGO positions may exacerbate social tensions, and external influence channeled through civil society structures could potentially undermine Brazil's sovereignty. Therefore, this partnership requires a careful balance between supporting democratic institutions and respecting national sovereignty.

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