

Tymen J. van der Ploeg, Wino J. M. van Veen and Cornelia R. M. Versteegh (eds.)

Civil Society in Europe. Minimum Norms and Optimum Conditions of its Regulation

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Published in:

VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):

[10.1007/s11266-018-9983-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-9983-0)

Publication date:

2018

Document Version

Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Svensson, C. F. (2018). Tymen J. van der Ploeg, Wino J. M. van Veen and Cornelia R. M. Versteegh (eds.): *Civil Society in Europe. Minimum Norms and Optimum Conditions of its Regulation*. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 29(3), 605-606. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-9983-0>

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Tymen J. van der Ploeg, Wino J. M. van Veen and Cornelia R. M. Versteegh (eds.): Civil Society in Europe. Minimum Norms and Optimum Conditions of Its Regulation

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, 589 pp., Anthology, Index, \$140.00

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The aim of the book is to produce a tool to work with civil society as efficiently as possible, which is developed by taking a closer look at regulation, organisation and activity. The topic area is broad as is the aim of discussing Law and regulation across nation-state traditions. This presents an issue of how to discuss such a range of complexity in order to present minimum norms and principles. The book succeeds in this project because of the recurring themes focusing on minimum norms and ideal principles. By insisting on Law's implication on practice, the book is a most welcome contribution to the field of civil society, both in practice and in research.

The authors are from different fields within Law with research focusing on aspects of civil society, self-regulation, human rights, NGO, non-profit organisations, partnerships, asylum, migration and terrorism. The book identifies and discusses principles and norms of civil society regulation, particularly in relation to human rights, freedom of expression and freedom of association. This project has two strands. The first one is to explore regulations of the Council of Europe and the European Union, and the second strand is about providing insight into specific social and legal cultures and regulations in twelve European countries: Belgium, The Czech Republic, England and Wales, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Spain and Sweden. This

structure follows the content of the book, which is clear and logically organised.

Questionnaires to experts in the twelve countries and country reports on each country create a frame for a comparative discussion with the aim of unfolding CSO (Civil Society Organisation) law and government relationships in each country. Political parties, trade unions and religious organisations were not part of the survey because of a view that they account for explicit considerations. This methodological delimitation makes sense at first hand, but certainly could deserve more legitimating in the book.

As identified in the research, in some countries legislation and Law is below minimum norms. This discussion is touched upon in chapter five. A further development of the book could be a more thorough and theory-oriented critical discussion of why norms are so difficult to agree on across countries: What are the implications if minimum norms are not honoured? How can the democratic project survive in countries that do not support civil society? How can CSO norms be implemented across nation-states?

In this sense, some of the book's topics focusing on minimum norms could be more ambitious. Identifying regulations across countries is important and a contribution to the field, but this leads to a discussion, which is not present in the book in spite of a view that optimal conditions are desirable.

On the other hand, the authors do stress the necessity for norms and principles in order to promote positive traits of CSO: democracy, social cohesion, sense of community and the shaping of policy. The book emphasises these traits as mentioned in the Copenhagen Criteria, which deal with nation-states' democratic governance, human rights and rule of law.

This positions civil society as one sector in society and distinct from what the authors see as the two others: state

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and market. CSOs are distinguished by often being voluntary to join, which provides a social arena for citizens to pursue interests and beliefs. In this sense CSOs act in a balance with state and the commercial market.

The concept of pluralism in democracies is extremely thought-provoking and deserves more attention. This concept deals with fundamental human rights. The book mentions that the European Court of Human Rights sees pluralism as something that ought to be state-guaranteed. However, the concept is new and has a multitude of meanings, which is why it is difficult to include judicially in several countries. The book emphasises a vast difference in governments' attitudes to pluralism. At one side of the spectrum Russia, Greece and Hungary have an arbitrary approach to pluralism. The latter even applies pressure on

critical civil society organisations dealing with human rights. In most countries, however, pluralism is widely applied, and at the other side of the spectrum, countries like the Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden stress the importance of multiculturalism and human rights.

The book's timely and pressing societal issues are relevant to a broad range of readers including legislators, practitioners and academics in civil society organisations, national governments and supra-national organisations as the European Union and United Nations.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author has no conflict of interest.