

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

Concept paper

1. Introduction

Civil society and non-governmental organizations play a crucial role, within their societies, in providing policy input, following new initiatives and in holding governments accountable. They can be active actors in promoting democratic and market-oriented reforms based on shared values, i.e. respect for democracy and human rights, the rule of law, good governance, principles of market economy and sustainable development . These are also the values and objectives of the European Neighbourhood Policy, including the newly created Eastern Partnership, addressed to Eastern ENP countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

In its Communication on the Eastern Partnership¹ the European Commission underlined that “ongoing reforms [in ENP East partner countries] require stronger participation of civil society to enhance oversight of public services and strengthen public confidence in them.” That is why “particular attention should be paid to the involvement of civil society” in the EaP initiative.

The Commission proposed “to support the further development of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)” and, in particular, “to establish an Eastern Partnership **Civil Society Forum** to promote contacts among CSOs and facilitate their dialogue with public authorities”. The Commission invited explicitly “the European Economic and Social Committee to participate in the Civil Society Forum”.

Concerning the Thematic Platforms of the EaP, the Commission proposed² as a potential subject of the work of the **Platform 1** on *Democracy, good governance and stability* in the area of *Security and Stability* “contacts among Civil Society Organizations to improve their capacity for advocacy and promote confidence building in areas of protracted conflict”. Regarding **Platform 4** on *Contacts between people* in the area of culture the Commission proposed “To open a window to complement the Youth in Action Programme in the six partner countries. This would promote youth mobility and exchanges to enhance intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding. It would also support the role of youth NGOs and other actors to strengthen civil society in the partner countries.” The enhanced co-operation with civil society organizations was also foreseen in the framework of Flagship Initiative 5 *Prevention of, preparedness for, and response to natural and man-made disasters*. Moreover, civil society input may be beneficial to many of the topics covered by the **Platform 2** on *Economic integration and convergence with the EU policies*.

¹ COM(2008) 823, 3 December 2008; <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0823:FIN:EN:PDF>;

² SEC(2008) 2974/3 ; http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/eastern/docs/sec08_2974_en.pdf

In the Eastern Partnership joint declaration, the Prague Declaration, from 7 May 2009, “the participants of the Prague Summit invite (...) the European Commission to develop and propose modalities for the establishment of a Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership”³.

To ensure transparency of the process leading to the establishment of the EaP Civil Society Forum (CSF), all interested parties were invited to provide their opinion via links on the web sites of EC/External Relations and of the EC Delegations in partner countries.

The call was made under the title “Invitation to contribute to an opinion on the Eastern Partnership Forum” and was available in English, French and Russian. It proposed a series of four questions, respectively: I. on the contribution of the CSF to the goals of the EaP; II. on participation in the work of the CSF; III. on the CSF structures and their links with the EaP multilateral track; IV. on the role of the EC in the process.

The consultation process started at the end of March and was closed on April 25. Some 40 contributions were received, mainly from civil society organisations based in the Eastern Partner countries but also from several EU-based organisations.

In its opinion adopted on May 13 on “Involvement of Civil society in the Eastern partnership”⁴, the European Economic and Social Committee warmly welcomed the EC proposal to establish an EaP CSF and expressed its wish to be given a key role in this initiative, building on its important experience and know how. The opinion claimed for an “operational and elastic” CSF, gathering a large range of civil society organisations from the EU and the EaP countries. It suggested that the CSF could meet at least once a year and set up working groups to address specific issues at the level of the panels of the EaP. The CSF would also be given the possibility to “draft proposals and recommendations for EU representatives and partner country governments”.

2. Dialogue with civil society under Black Sea Synergy

In the framework of the Black Sea Synergy (BSS), the regional dialogue with civil society has been promoted both by the Commission and through a national (Romanian) initiative, involving most of the countries concerned by the EaP initiative.

The BSS from the start attracted considerable NGO interest - an alliance of 29 environmental NGOs met in Odessa on 7 February 2008 and adopted a position paper on “Greening the Black Sea Synergy”.

The first BSS seminar on freedom of expression was held on 19-20 May 2008 in Chisinau, organized by the Commission and hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Moldova. Around 90 participants (civil society and government representatives) from countries in the Black Sea region were present, as well as representatives from OSCE, Council of Europe and international NGOs. Four thematic sessions took place: overview of international standards; criminal law issues; access to

³ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/107589.pdf

⁴ Full text: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/documents/opinions/avis_en.asp

information; media pluralism. The Commission has decided that the next seminar would be dedicated to legal aid and access to justice in the Black Sea countries and would take place in the second half of 2009. It is envisaged to base the discussion among participants inter alia on practical experience of legal aid delivery and implementation of relevant human rights standards in view of feeding the reflection and promote an exchange of best practices in the Black Sea Region.

As for the Romanian initiative, a Black Sea NGO Forum, “Time to meet”, was held in Bucharest on 31.10-2.11.2008. The event was organized in partnership with the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation and UNDP Romania. The forum gathered around over 100 various NGOs (220 participants) from Black Sea countries, Belarus, some EU Member States and the governmental representatives. Three panels were formed and focused on the transversal issue of NGO cooperation in the Black Sea region, with presentations and discussions on three fields: 1. social justice and human rights; 2. democracy and good governance; 3. environment.

Regarding the civil society dialogue with countries of the Eastern Europe and South Caucasus under both the Black Sea Synergy and the EaP, both initiatives should be maintained and continue their work in parallel: the BSS NGO Forum and BSS seminars are rather thematic and regionally oriented, while EaP Civil Society Forum should be focused on activities linked to the goals of the Eastern Partnership (and ENP), bringing partners closer to the EU. The Commission will seek synergies in both forums to avoid overlapping of activities.

3. EaP Civil Society Forum

I. How can the goals of the Eastern Partnership be advanced by a Civil Society Forum?

The CSF should contribute to the objectives of the Eastern Partnership by:

- enriching the governmental track of the EaP by providing a civil society perspective, notably through the regular provision of recommendations (input/evaluation/monitoring of the work of the EaP), including input in the work of ministerial meetings and multilateral platforms;
- promoting dialogue between CSOs, networking and exchange of experience & best practices with other groupings (EESC, social partners, NGOs, think tanks etc.), working on the issues of common interest linked to the goals of the EaP and the ENP;
- sharing experience in the European integration processes in EaP countries;
- discussing what civil society can do to promote the multilateral component of the EaP, including confidence building measures in the regional conflicts;
- building capacity of civil society organisations in the countries of the EaP through the contacts with CSOs from EU MS and international organisations/networks;
- providing an open channel for permanent inclusion of civil society expertise and views in the EaP process;
- facilitating relations with the EU institutions;

- contributing, via the Civil Society Forum, to the strengthening of national civil societies and CSOs dialogues with authorities in the EaP partner countries;
- strengthening institutional capacity building role of CSOs, especially in those sectors where they have valuable know-how and can contribute to achieving the goals of the EaP, also on national level.

II. How should participation in the work of this Forum be determined?

- Membership in the EaP Civil Society Forum should be open to civil society organisations i.e. grass roots organisations, trade unions, employers' organisations, professional associations, NGOs, think tanks, non-profit foundations, national and international CSOs/networks and other relevant Civil Society actors from EaP countries, but also EU Member States and international organisations/networks. CSOs from third countries may also be invited. The EESC and its equivalents in partner countries should play a key role, especially regarding business, employment, labour and social issues.

The Commission favours the following method of selection of participants:

An expression of interest to participate in the EaP CSF followed by a selection on the basis of transparent criteria, as listed below:

- **Geographic origin/nationality** – a majority of CSF participants should come from the CSOs from EaP partner countries (and their number per each partner country should be balanced). However an important number of participants should also come from EU MS and international organisations/networks to allow for exchange of experience in the EU affairs/policies (as one of the main goals of the EaP is to bring Eastern partner countries closer to the EU). CSOs from third countries may also be invited;
- **Diversity and proportionality** – participants should represent all variety of civil society actors (grass roots organizations, trade unions, employers' organisations, professional associations, NGOs, think-tanks, non-profit foundations, national and international CSOs/networks and other relevant Civil Society actors). They should be able to contribute to all thematic aspects of the EaP i.e.: 1) Democracy, good governance and stability; 2) Economic integration and convergence with EU policies; 3) Environment, climate change & energy security; 4) Contacts between people;
- **Experience in the EU/ENP/EaP matters** (taking into account past and current activities and results achieved).

While applying the criteria listed above in the selection process the Commission will also take into account the specificity of each of the partner countries.

The participating organisations should be motivated by and willing to contribute to the objectives of the EaP.

Certain organisations may be willing and able to cover the expenses linked to their participation in the CSF but this will not be retained as a selection criterion.

III. What should be the structures of the Forum? How would it interact with the other EaP structures (platforms, panels etc.)?

The CSF could interact with the EaP multilateral structures by:

- participating in the exchange of experience, knowledge and good practices –this would involve an access, as appropriate, to the working documents of the platforms and/or the ministerial meetings;
- providing advice and proposals to the platforms;
- monitoring and assessing the platform activities, possibly leading to the production of public reports;
- providing written opinions and positions which would be obligatory for consideration in the relevant thematic platforms and/or ministerial meetings;
- attending, through a selection of representatives and upon invitation, the meetings of platforms, ministerial meetings and EaP Summits..

EaP Civil Society Forum should **hold plenary sessions/conferences at regular intervals, at least once a year.**

Thematic working groups could be established reflecting the priorities of the EaP multilateral track, i.e.: 1. Democracy, good governance and stability; 2. Economic integration and convergence with EU policies; 3. Environment, climate change & energy security; 4. Contacts between people.

These working groups may appoint their **coordinators**, for a fixed period of time. They should be EaP partner countries nationals. They would in the future lead the preparations of the CSF plenary sessions/conferences (with the Commission assistance as described under section IV below)) and will co-chair the CSF meetings. They will also act as focal points, structuring and organising the work of the CSF between the meetings.

It is recommended that the CSF coordinators could be invited as ad hoc participants in the meetings of the EaP multilateral platforms, where they would report on the CSF activities and present its recommendations. They could also be invited to the EaP ministerial meetings and EaP summits. The coordinator for a working group on Democracy, good governance and stability may also act as a “spokesperson” of the CSF⁵.

The CSF will finally decide itself on its structures and activities during the launch conference to be organised by the EC in Brussels in mid-November.

⁵ These provisions do not exclude the possibility that other representatives of and participants in the CSF than the coordinators be invited as ad hoc participants in meetings of the platforms, ministerial meetings or EaP Summits

IV. What role should the European Commission play in the launch and in the work of the Forum?

The European Commission, together with the EU Presidency and the EESC, will organise the launch of the EaP CSF in mid-November 2009 in Brussels.

In the future the CSOs themselves should share the responsibility for the work of the CSF and the EC will push since the early stage for the EaP Civil Society Forum to become a self-organised structure.

The Commission could set up a “steering committee” for the launch of the EaP CSF and involve in its works the EU Presidency, the EESC and recognised independent personalities. This steering committee would be responsible for the swift selection process of the CSF participants and facilitate the work during the launching conference of the CSF.

With the time the role of the EC should diminish to a strict minimum:

- provision of financial, logistic and technical support to the forum meetings and activities (including i.a provision of expertise, visa assistance, etc.);
- coordination between CSF and EaP platform activities, notably by providing relevant information;
- political support to CSF activities (dialogue with local authorities, promotion of the CSF as an essential component of the EaP).

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