

## **BÖLL EXPERT MEETING**

### **How Can the EU Support Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership?<sup>1</sup>**

The question how the EU can support civil society in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a challenging one. Civil society as such is not a new issue in EU policy; what is new is the proactive function of civil society: for the first time it is a shaping actor. The situation varies from country to country. The ‘best case situation’ we find in Belarus where people are running a national platform which is able to support democracy in an authoritarian regime. The national platform is perceived as a very important democratic alternative. The general

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problem is that the NGOs might be crowded out by GONGOs and other non-democratic interest groups. Another problem is the dependency of NGOs on international donors. There is no guarantee that civil society is able to fulfil the high expectations of the European Union.

It is vital that for EaP countries an EU membership perspective is not off the table, otherwise the incentives are too small to stay attractive. The EaP is an on-going and unfinished project. The role for and involvement of civil society in this project is not clear yet – a survival not guaranteed, changes are possible and desirable. EaP, as a second track diplomacy, is highly appreciated by the European Commission (EC) but much more could be done by the EC to include civil society actors better. More effective monitoring is urgently needed. Also, as the case of Belarus shows, more attention should be dedicated to national platforms. And, finally, the steering committee has to be supported as at the moment it cannot go beyond logistics and administrative issues.

## **Belarus**

After the presidential elections in Belarus on 19 December 2011 the EaP is the only communicating channel with the EU. How can we use and develop it?

The situation in Belarus is ongoing and unstable, but it is necessary to build a strategy. Waiting is not an option. None of the traditional institutions work properly: the government, the court, the media – none of them are under civil society control, maybe the national platform can provide some of it. The EC is pressing hard to include civil society on all levels of EaP, which is seen as a hindrance by the Belarusian government and indicated as the reason why there is no progress in EaP.

In a way, the situation in Belarus can be characterised as ‘civil war’ –even though there is no violent fighting in the streets – because of the radical division of society. The national platform provides a consensus process. There are two important issues on the short term: the release of the political prisoners and the parliamentary elections in 2012. If nothing changes, these will not be elections in the real sense of the word. However, the authorities are usually more sensitive for a dialogue before elections – they will have to at least imitate this process. This is a chance for civil society to negotiate on the elections. Civil society would like to be the third party in the parliament where then all the fighting which happens now outside the institutions could take place. The opposition concept should be changed into a dialogue concept. One should go for a ‘Round Table’ a couple of months before the elections similar to what happened in Poland in early 1989.

Everybody is talking of consolidation, but no one knows how to bring it about. There are two camps in Belarusian civil society, one in favour of radical actions against Lukashenka, which is quite a significant group. The second group, the majority of the national platform, is also in favour of sanctions but sees the necessity for space for civil society and for a return to negotiations. Everything is currently seen in the shadow of the events of December 2010, but nothing has really changed compared with the months before that: there is still the need to force the government to negotiations; there is still the same agenda.

What are the main obstacles for building an opposition in Belarus? First, Belarusian citizens are isolated from independent informations. Secondly, there is the fragmentation of civil society. There are nine opposition candidates but no public, well-known faces who could speak on behalf of civil society. To change this programmes are needed in the area of public dialogue, media, education, research and analytic programmes and external promotion (foreign affairs programme). There is a need for new ideas to be brought to society: concepts like Europeanisation, Belarus as one nation etc.

At this moment it is difficult to see how to continue to work with the government. However, this would be possible on a purely technical level and it would be crucial for civil society. The European Commission has so far been the best intermediary between the Belarusian government and civil society, so it should continue this role. Also important are regional cooperation and the implementation of long term programmes and investment in infrastructure for projects.<sup>2</sup>

What is also important is to build a middle class. The presence of a middle class was already noticeable during the recent demonstrations. And the emergence of a middle class is due to the liberalisation and the EU policy during the last years. Furthermore, visa facilitation and easier travel conditions would be crucial for Belarusians.

This meeting is overshadowed by the things happening in the Arab world. None of that happened directly because the EC did something but on the other hand a lot happen because the EC did a lot of things: none of which was visa facilitation. True is also that North Africans have much more difficulties travelling to Europe compared to people living in EaP countries. People in Belarus and other EaP countries need to understand this.

Requesting things from the donors like the EC is legitimate but in the end donors will not be the defining factor of what will happen in the society. What is happening in North Africa today happens because large parts of the population have access to education, to knowledge, to information. The dynamic cannot come from the donor, from the European Commission. And no matter how much the Polish presidency will do, the dynamic has to come from within the society. Of course the EC can and should be criticised on a lot of what they do. They inflict too much bureaucratic pressure on civil society organisations and often keep on working with the wrong partners but in the end what is vital is that they work with a lot of different actors in/of civil society so that a dynamic can be created. In that sense the Mediterranean Partnership had a major influence on the owners of power. The system in Tunisia broke down because parts of the power structure did not work anymore; EC activities contributed to that process.

The EC is now considering ways how to keep communication channels open with Belarus, which is very difficult and also a political question.

EaP is an example that the EU has learned its lesson. It is, not a project-driven approach but a broad strategic offer for those countries to come closer to the EU. And this offer is extended not only to authorities but also to the civil societies, to create new opportunities for networks fostering new idea and examples show that in general it works.

The EC tries to bring about change via activating the social potential and the creation of programmes designed for SMEs and flagship initiatives. They promote a triangle: networking with the EU, SMEs and technical assistance. Help in the form of grants is provided as well as a special credit line. All of this shows that things are going into the right direction.

It is clearly a problem that some projects are donor-driven. The EC uses some actors in civil society as service agents which can be good but could also be wrong. One has to find a way to

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<sup>2</sup> A good example for the support of the EU towards the civil society in Belarus is the project Civil Society Stability for Belarus (<http://www.easternpartnership.org/announcement/civil-society-stability-belarus>) which was finally announced in May 2011.

adapt the way in which the money is distributed. Finally, there is the question of sanctions which is an old one but still hard to answer.

On the technical level and expert level the cooperation with Belarus will go on. Sanction would punish the population and civil society more than the elites.

EaP is a long-term project. Education, capacity building, etc. are parts of what it takes to build democracies - 'the kitchen door' is the way to get in. We should not wait twenty years like in the Arab countries but nevertheless it takes time to build democracy.

The difference between South and East is the institutionalisation of the civil society process. In the beginning not all believed in the idea. Now that it did work, the infrastructure and a secretariat are not just needed but unavoidable. There is also need for a small project fund with as little bureaucracy as possible.

### **The position of the civil forum of the EaP in the context of the Polish EU presidency**

EaP is a clear priority on the Polish presidency's agenda, so is democracy support. The conflict with Belarus after the recent elections is a new situation; Warsaw wants to help the independent forces of opposition in Belarus. The open question is in which context these ambitions from the official sides will result into activities and structures.

The Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw has been a member of the civil society forum (csf) from the very beginning. They have always looked at how to facilitate and improve things. In this context they sent an online questionnaire to all the participants of the csf on what they would like to see improved. It is now the third poll and the turnout is much better than last time. The survey is still running. These are the preliminary results.<sup>3</sup>

### **The aims of the survey**

The question whether EaP is an effective instrument (bringing the EaP countries closer to the EU, in terms of both democratic and economic standards) was positively answered by an overwhelming majority (26% strongly agreed, 54% rather agreed).

### **The expectations towards the Forum were:**

- **Networking – 50%** (very important/important)
- Taking up **new projects** in partnership with the other organizations participating in the CSF – **43%**
- **Impact on the decisions and actions of my government** undertaken in the scope of the EaP – **48%**
- **Impact on decisions and actions of the EC** undertaken in the scope of the EaP – **65%**
- **Acquiring the information** about the EaP developments – **61%**
- **Dissemination of my organization's positions** on further developments of the EaP – **39%**

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<sup>3</sup> The final results are to be found on: <http://www.isp.org.pl/site.php?id=1&pub=471&lang=2&lang=2>

### The Cfs has contributed to more

- **more frequent** meetings between my organisation and the civil society organisations in my country – **72%** (yes)
- developing **common recommendations** among civil society organizations in my country – **61%**
- **increasing the role of my organisation as the opinion leader** among other civil society organisations and public opinion – **48%**
- enhancement of my organization **contacts** with the organizations participating in the Forum from other countries (both EU and EaP) – **63%**
- undertaking **joint projects** with other organisations participating in the Forum from other countries (both EU and EaP) – **24%**
- **better understanding** of the EaP initiative – **74%**

### Impact on decisions and effectiveness

- To what extent do you believe that **the CSF has an impact on decisions and actions** of the EaP government platforms?
  - Definitely has an impact/has an impact – **20%**
  - Definitely no/ no impact – **43%**
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- To what extent do you think that **current work format of the Forum is effective?** (the division on 4 working groups and 12 subgroups)
  - Very effective/effective – **54%**

### What actions should be taken in order to increase Forum impact on decisions and actions of the EaP government platforms?

- Improving the ability of the Forum to develop Increasing opportunities for **participation in the government workshops, panels, expert meetings** – **87%**
- **specific recommendation** – **80%** (yes, rather yes)
- Improving the opportunities for **participation in the government platforms** – **85%**

### What actions should be taken?

- Better access to the **information about government platforms' work** – **85%**
- More active **role of the European Commission** in mediating between Forum and the EaP government platforms – **87%**
- More active **role of the Steering Committee** in **advocating** of the Forum agenda – **78%**

### With which institutions/organisations the Forum should enhance the contacts at first in order to increase its impact on decision makers?

**Here the European Parliament was mentioned by 45% and the European Economic and Social Committee by 37%.**

### Final discussion

Due to the events in the Arab world the participants were also concerned about a shift in attention (and finances) away from EaP to the Mediterranean countries. They called on the European Commission and Parliament for assurance that EaP and EMP should not have to compete against each other for the same budget. However, as one participant observed: 15

years ago, there were budgetary shifts from the south to the east and now it may go the other way round. There will be no additional money coming into the system in the near future.

### **Decision making**

Some participants of the meeting expressed their concern that outside the EaP countries interest of civil society for EaP is low, though it has to be said that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) has shown a similar pattern: interest is only present in neighbouring countries. In a way EMP could serve as a model for the EaP. The civil society actors involved in the EMP now have lot of weight in decisions, even though they were doing very unspectacular work during the last 14 years. The decisions are taken to some extent taken in the institutions but to a greater extent at the level of Member States. For that a wider public awareness (in the EU countries) is needed. This is a common challenge for all.

Other participants thought that the focus of the platforms should lie on the decision making institutions. It is doubtful if public awareness can be created/will help at all. What civil society fora need is a functioning structure with information-sharing and qualified people to attend the relevant meetings. EaP platforms are not typical decision making places but more about the sharing of information, etc. CsF should not try to influence the formal processes; but concentrate on agenda-setting (also bringing new ideas and highlighting some points). This is more feasible.

The forums can not replace decision making bodies but it can help making the current decision structures transparent. A lot of documents of the EC/EaP negotiations are not published (neither from the EaP nor from the EU's side).

### **Secretariat**

The secretariat is a crucial issue. It might also be a reliable source of information for the EC which goes beyond the EU Delegations. The secretariat could also serve as an additional informal embassy to improve the second track for diplomatic relations. The steering committee has to evaluate this in more depth.

At the moment the funding of a secretariat by the European Commission cannot be guaranteed. Efforts will be made to remove obstacles. Still, a secretariat and also participation in a formal meeting is not crucial for the success of the civil society forum. Ideas are crucial as are aims. For that you do not need a secretariat. The forum should also be more active on the ground.

Other participants strongly disagreed with this statement. At least the participation in meetings, and may it be a silent observer status, is crucial and will have an helping influence on the democratic behaviour of the EaP governments. Also needed is more concrete work in the working groups. When the expectations rise to more ambitious aims more capacity needs to be developed. More experts should be in the groups; at the moment the work is mostly on the shoulders of the local people. Joint projects of the forum cannot be a number one priority but the urge for them should be respected. It is more important to make the present 'machinery' of the forum work more smoothly than to focus on new strategic aims. The fast development of the last two years was not without slips which have to be corrected now. The secretariat should be financed by the Commission; but maybe foreign ministries will be an alternative for funding or other donors. Nevertheless, independence will not be guaranteed

either. Concern was expressed that if the secretariat were only be financed by one big donor, be it the Commission or ECOSOC, this would make it less independent.