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## Towards a stronger role for civil society in the Eastern Partnership

*Agnieszka Lada*

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### BACKGROUND

Launched two years ago, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) introduced civil society as a new actor in EU relations with Eastern Europe through the creation of the Civil Society Forum (CSF) – an annual meeting platform for EU and EaP civil society as well as non-governmental organisations (CSOs and NGOs) financed by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Yet policies supporting the development of civil society in Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus are still perceived by the EU and EaP governments as less important than 'serious politics', and are extremely underfinanced compared to the funds given to EaP governments.

Recent events in Africa and the brutal steps taken by the Lukashenka regime against the opposition in Belarus since the December 2010 elections have prompted the EU to reconsider the role of civil society. The 2011 ENP Review published last May lays a renewed emphasis on civil society as a crucial component for change and democratisation.

Its main innovations include establishing a Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment

for Democracy, as well as promoting media freedom by supporting civil society organisations' use of electronic communications. This shift in the EU's approach is welcome, but a lot still needs to be done. A clear plan for how such support could be used effectively is needed, and the role of the Civil Society Forum should be better defined as a representative body of CSOs.

Designing a strategy to support democracy through civil society requires a partnership with the relevant actors. Non-governmental organisations should be treated as institutional partners of the EU, Member States and the EaP countries when planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating EaP programmes, at bilateral and multilateral level. A bottom-up approach would also strengthen a grassroots European vocation, creating a push for reform in some EaP countries through social pressure on governments. Achieving this will not be possible without establishing a visa-free regime for EaP citizens.

### STATE OF PLAY

#### The state of civil society in the region

Civil society in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus remains weak and fragmented. The panorama is very diverse, ranging from large NGOs with offices in Brussels to small, local grassroots organisations. In an early phase of third sector development this makes cooperation within the countries and with the EU harder, as the various organisations have different needs and means. They also suffer from limited engagement with the societies in which they operate and are entirely dependent on foreign funding. In Belarus and Azerbaijan,

for example, there is no legal or financial framework for an active civil society and opposition activities are met with repression. CSOs acting openly are just a *façade* created by the government and even in the more democratic countries in the region transparency is often lacking.

The start of the EaP process raised CSOs' hopes that their importance and influence on the process of coming closer to the EU would increase. Yet many weaknesses remain, including a lack of knowledge about the EU and its assistance instruments, language

barriers, and few tools to support NGO capacity-building and dialogue with government administrations. Complicated and bureaucratic financing rules of existing EU assistance instruments make cooperation and the engagement of NGOs in the democratisation process difficult.

Despite these obstacles, civil society organisations are determined to play a stronger role in fostering reforms. But even in countries where NGOs are recognised by the government (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) their impact on policy formulation is very limited. Authorities are mostly reluctant to accept policy recommendations from CSOs, considering them unprofessional and politically biased. Many of them have indeed little expertise in advocacy. However, trends indicate that several non-governmental organisations (e.g. Moldova) have become increasingly professional.

National platforms of CSOs, which should be consulted by national governments and coordinate the NGOs' work, have been established in all six EaP countries. But so far, their impact varies from country to country and in most cases remains rather limited. One problem is that it is always the same CSOs that are represented

on national platforms and in contacts between the European Commission/European External Action Service (EEAS). The EC and EU delegations in the EaP countries identify and cooperate with the larger and stronger NGOs and think tanks based in capital cities – often also present in Brussels – which have by definition more experience, contacts and potential. The downside is that the EU is unable to deepen its understanding of dynamics on the ground, and grants are usually awarded to the same CSOs that have the capacity and knowledge to take advantage of the EU's financing system. Also, consultation with such organisations has so far been largely ineffective and tends to be treated as a necessary formality; CSOs are frustrated that their opinions are not taken seriously.

Members of national platforms meet yearly through the Civil Society Forum (in Brussels in 2009, in Berlin in 2010, and will meet in 2011 in Poland), which brings together about 320 civil society actors from the EU and partner countries. Interest in participating has increased, but the low contribution that the Forum has brought to the EaP process has started to limit its appeal. Thus, if nothing changes, the willingness to participate might decrease.

	Estimated number of registered NGOs	Number of NGOs participating in national platforms	Total number of NGOs participating in the CSF (2009 and 2010)	EIDHR funding in EaP countries 2007-2010, in euro
Armenia	4000-5000	145	34	5,548,089.53
Azerbaijan	3500	40	31	3,047,130.00
Belarus	3000	120-150	43	6,281,943.70 *
Georgia	Several thousand	90	35	5,026,631.34
Moldova	6000	30	29	2,616,118.14
Ukraine	6700	70	44	3,032,697.45
UE	-----	-----	92	-----
Third countries	-----	-----	10	-----

\* including €3 million for the European Humanities University in Vilnius

## PROSPECTS

The ENP review presents civil society and governments as the two pillars of the EU partnership with the neighbouring regions and encourages them to cooperate.

### Financial support

EU support for CSOs in the EaP countries is carried out mainly through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the thematic programmes financed by the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), and the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI). However, according to the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw, support is granted mainly for activities concerned with the improvement of the status of groups threatened with social exclusion (e.g. refugees, people with disabilities, women), election education and monitoring. An Open Society Institute analysis of the grants released for Eastern Partnership countries in the period 2007-2009 shows that the

beneficiaries of the largest slice of funding (80%) are not NGOs in the recipient countries, and only 1.42% of funding goes to civil society in the six EaP countries (ENPI and thematic instruments such as EIDHR, excluding Member State bilateral aid) while governments receive the largest portion. Indeed, civil society organisations have been arguing for the establishment of a Civil Society Facility in the ENPI envelope to finance the capacity and participation of CSOs, a proposal now taken on board by the EU.

The European Commission Communication, published in May, establishes such a mechanism for 2011-2013 to be continued in the next financial perspective. It is welcome that the European Commission did not wait until 2014 but identified funds already for 2011 (most probably up to €50 million), and thereafter more money should be available for CSOs. But further aspects need to be taken into account: support should go directly to CSOs

and NGOs, and should not be limited to specific projects, but also for capacity building, to map civil society development in the six countries, and to monitor EU funding.

It is also crucial to engage the CSOs on the ground and the national platforms in planning the functioning of the Civil Society Facility, to avoid the mistake made in the Balkans, where local organisations were not consulted. This would help to recognise the needs in the EaP countries, on the one hand, and enable the CSOs to understand EaP mechanisms and avoid too high expectations, on the other hand. In the new CSF, especially at regional level, the focus should be on areas where synergy, added value, ownership and sustainability, based on already existing activities at national and regional level, can be achieved. One example could be support for regional networking between CSOs. Furthermore, the Facility should grant large, as well as small projects (€1 million – €25,000) based on more flexible rules of financing, for instance by introducing pre-financing and lowering the current co-financing requirements. A support structure for CSOs through national offices could be created to provide services such as databases, sectoral analysis and training.

The Communication backs also the Polish idea of establishing a European Endowment for Democracy (EED) that would seek to bring greater influence and coherence in the efforts of the EU, its Member States and several of the large European political foundations already active in the field of democracy support. The novelty is that the EED would focus on political parties, trade unions and non-registered NGOs – something the EU has never done as it was perceived as interference in the political dynamics of third countries. The American example of the National Endowment for Democracy shows this could be beneficial, although there is a risk of financing the 'wrong' organisations.

The EED should not take away funding for human rights. While the objectives, the financial and managerial arrangements of the Endowment will differ from other democratisation tools, they should be applied with a view to reinforcing synergies and coherence, as already indicated. However, it is not clear how this mechanism will work exactly and where the funding will come from. Also, the proposal in the Communication to promote unhindered access to the internet needs further elaboration.

### **Local ownership and capacity-building**

Although the current system of awarding grants for projects is functioning, CSOs from EaP countries are critical of the leadership of Western NGOs when it comes to the application process and to working in consortia. Whilst it would be hard to change the rules (which could, however be made easier), local ownership of projects needs to be ensured. Their knowledge of the needs on the ground should make them project leaders, in some cases, supported by their EU colleagues.

Experience in Central Europe has shown that joint projects are one of the best ways of building capacity.

Plans to set up additional capacity-building mechanisms are welcomed. Tenders for training, networking events and transfer of know-how should be available for consortia that are well connected to the EaP and EU. NGOs and private companies are eligible, but priority should be given to projects led by NGOs, as they are credible partners in the EaP region. Even so, the bulk of funding should be given directly to local CSOs, also as a means to strengthen them.

In the long run, capacity-building requires the availability of core funding for larger NGOs, which in turn would require changes to the Financial Regulation of the EU, in order to lower the danger of the 'projectisation' of civil society in the receiving countries, especially if the calls are narrow in scope and for short-term projects. Such an approach increases donor dependency, inhibits CSOs from becoming financially sustainable, and encourages 'mission drift'. One solution, besides offering core funding, would be to ensure that projects are longer term (3-5 years) and relatively broad in their aims, to allow applicant organisations flexibility in project design and in their organisational missions.

Last but not least, the existing mismatch between donors that cannot find grantees and CSOs that are unaware of funding possibilities should be solved by better donor coordination, for example, through the establishment of a kind of a 'donors' club' in each country through the EU Delegations.

### **EU support**

The new financial support system is a good start, but it needs to be backed by a stronger political commitment and sufficient attention to the needs and recommendations of Eastern European civil society, through the consultation of the CSF Steering Committee and the national platforms.

EU Delegations should identify CSOs at local level, as has been done in Ukraine. The Commission's plans to map local organisations are a step in the right direction. CSOs could prepare and update such lists directly, thus solving the problem of the Commission's limited resources. A similar mechanism could be launched for the monitoring of the implementation of reforms in EaP countries – exercises that are now carried out by experts from Brussels.

Civil society could also play a role with regard to Euronest – the EaP parliamentary assembly that started its regular meetings in May 2011. The CSF Steering Committee representatives should be allowed to attend Euronest meetings. Apart from that, the Commission, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee,

political parties, and trade unions could also play a role in developing horizontal contacts with their counterparts in EaP countries.

### Strengthening the national platforms

For national platforms to become more effective they need to strengthen their expert base, their financial sustainability and autonomy, learn to develop policy-relevant work and strengthen contacts with government. Local NGOs, national governments (at least those with democratic commitments) and EU delegations could team up to draft an action plan for civil society development. Part of the work entails establishing statutory rules for the platforms' work, as they currently lack any legal base. Relations between national governments and civil society need to be encouraged. The Commission should stay in close contact with the platforms so as to send an important message to national governments that civil society is crucial for democracy. In consultation with the Steering Committee and EU-based NGOs, the platform's participants should prepare a plan with concrete goals on how they could be involved in further developing EaP. Implementation of such action plans should be monitored and communicated to wider parts of society to overcome the lack of visibility of EU support to grassroots organisations, in order to show what the EaP can offer and how citizens could be engaged. One way, already successful in Central Europe, would be to give grants to most consolidated NGOs to run awareness-raising campaigns.

### Strengthening the Civil Society Forum

The Civil Society Forum provides an opportunity to develop contacts and projects between EaP and EU civil society organisations. The work of the CSF is appreciated by the EU institutions and the Member States. The Forum appointed a Steering Committee to represent the participants and liaise with EU institutions. Two years into the process, the CSF still needs a clear strategy, which it has to define and implement itself. As long as the contribution of CSOs to the EaP through the Forum is not focused on the broader transition agenda and the issues surrounding the EaP, the Forum will fail to be regarded as an integral part of the EaP process. The Forum should concentrate on the preparation and delivery of CSO input, making the Eastern Partnership process more transparent, visible and accountable, as well as encouraging a pro-European approach by the EaP governments.

So far, Forum meetings have been important in developing contacts and networking between EU

and EaP organisations. They have increased the role of EaP CSOs as opinion leaders, and supported their ability to undertake additional activities, such as advocacy and new research topics and joint projects with other CSOs. Participating in the Forum and in national platforms also helps the development of joint recommendations. But the majority of those participating in the Forum would like it to be not just a single meeting but an equal and active partner in the on-going dialogue between national governments and the EU.

To achieve that and to ensure that the EU and EaP governments benefit from independent input from civil society, several steps must be taken. Firstly, the Forum needs to sharpen up its processes and develop relevant input to EaP meetings. Secondly, to help participants develop and communicate recommendations and strengthen the Steering Committee in its advocacy role, CSF representatives should be given a 'permanent participant' status in official platform meetings, thematic working groups, expert panels, and flagship initiatives, with prior access to draft policy documents. Including the Civil Society Forum in the EaP would lead to a better understanding in Brussels of the needs of partner countries and increased public awareness about the civil society agenda. All parties except Belarus agree with this idea. Thirdly, the EU should equip the CSF with effective institutional resources, including a Secretariat. The Commission should reconsider its position on this question, regardless of the difficulties. So far, a coordination role has been played by the Steering Committee of 17 volunteers, albeit with obvious limitations. This solution cannot guarantee the Forum's effective operation over the long term and threatens to hamper further development.

The current mechanisms aimed at helping the development of civil society in EaP countries need to become more effective and reach wider parts of society in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. The solutions proposed in the Commission Communication, if implemented properly, will not democratise the region in one day, but they have the potential to strengthen democratic movements in the EaP countries. A stronger, more focused and more visible civil society would give a new impetus to the democratisation process in the region.



*Agnieszka Lada is Head of the European Programme at the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw and was a visiting fellow at the EPC from February to April 2011.*

*These issues are discussed in the EPC's Europe in the World programme.*

European Policy Centre ■ Résidence Palace, 155 rue de la Loi, 1040 Brussels, Belgium  
Tel: +32 (0)2 231 03 40 ■ Fax: +32 (0)2 231 07 04 ■ Email: [info@epc.eu](mailto:info@epc.eu) ■ Website: [www.epc.eu](http://www.epc.eu)



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