



EASTERN PARTNERSHIP Civil Society Forum

POSITION PAPER OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM TO THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP SUMMIT

(Prepared by the Steering Committee)

Warsaw, September 29, 2011

The start-up phase of the Eastern Partnership is over. Today, it is essential to give Eastern Partnership new energy through actions based on common efforts and official cooperation linking the EU, Partner Countries and civil society stakeholders in all the spheres that have been identified for the Eastern Partnership. In order to develop and use the EaP to its full potential, it is necessary to offer the European neighbourhood countries a perspective in the EU such as sectorial integration. With this position paper, the EaP Civil Society Forum reiterates its role as a full-fledged participant in the development of the Eastern Partnership and suggests mechanisms contributing to its implementation.

Perspectives and Recommendations

1. Strengthen democratic societies

1.1. The EaP Civil Society Forum encourages the European Commission and the governments of the partner countries to accelerate the dialogue, cooperation and integration processes within the EaP following the **principles and models proposed by the Copenhagen Criteria**. The Civil Society Forum confirms its role and capacity in strengthening and enhancing the **monitoring of the commitments undertaken by the partner country governments**.

1.2 In order to substantially improve participatory and effective decision-making, **Civil Society expertise** must be taken into consideration at any time in the future steps of the EaP.

1.3. The Civil Society Forum supports the launch of the **Civil Society Facility**, which will allow CSOs to play a more active and efficient role in the EaP. The Forum confirms the need to engage the National Platforms in each EaP country in planning the priorities of this instrument and how it will operate.



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1.4. The Civil Society Forum is in favour of diplomatic solutions allowing democratic CSOs from **non-recognized political entities in the EaP countries** to be part of the Forum, ensuring its participatory, inclusive and cooperative nature. The CSF proposes to emphasise the importance of the **local dimension** represented by NGOs and local authorities of the EaP countries in order to reach the general objectives of the Partnership.

1.5 The CSF welcomes the approach of the European Commission and the EU member states to consider the civil society in **Belarus** as a partner despite *de-facto* suspension of cooperation with the Belarusian government and highly appreciates Belarusian CSOs as an inseparable part of the Forum. The CSF also follows the development of the situation with democratic freedoms and human rights in **Azerbaijan** after the protests and following arrests in April 2011. It calls upon the Azerbaijani authorities for the swift release of all prisoners arrested before and during the democracy rallies.

2. Associate via sectorial integration

2.1 The convergence with EU policies in such fields as migration, trade, energy, transport, environment, SME and innovations, education, etc. creates the appropriate conditions for a gradual sectorial integration of partner countries with the EU. A proper space should also be given to non institutional networks promoting exchanges of youth, volunteers and culture. **Visa liberalisation agreements, DCFTA, ACCA agreements** and other relevant institutional frameworks should serve as a legal mechanism for deepening such *rapprochement*. The Civil Society Forum in particular calls for taking steps **towards full visa liberalization** as soon as individual EaP countries meet the agreed conditions.

2.2 **Greater regional cooperation among EaP** partner countries at all possible levels would secure more sustainability and synergies between various initiatives deepening European integration.

3. Anchor the EaP Civil Society Forum in the family of European institutions

3.1. Given the growing potential capacity of the CSF, the technical difficulties restricting its role are becoming more evident. The establishment of a permanent **Secretariat** of the CSF would allow the Forum to operate much more efficiently. The **participation of civil society from the EU** must be secured in order to allow a full partnership from both the EU and EaP countries.

3.2 The CSF suggests that civil society organizations should be regarded as partners of the EU, the EU Member States and of the EaP states when it comes to planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programmes of the Eastern Partnership. **The highest possible level of active interaction and access to information in these processes should be ensured.**



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Civil Society Forum and the challenges of today

The EaP Civil Society Forum is a non-state actor involved in a policy shaping body. This is innovative and should be supported to the maximum extent. The Forum demonstrates a possibility for a paradigm change of huge significance. With the new developments, the EU should institutionalize that role, providing civil society with real decision-making power and legitimacy to influence the process. By raising the Civil Society to an unprecedented level of influence, it proves the European model and practice to be both innovative and progressive.

The situation and democratic processes in the EaP region still proves to be volatile and unstable: the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, the events during the presidential election in Belarus in December 2010 and the public unrest in Azerbaijan in April 2011 all emphasized the need to further strengthen Europe's ties with the countries of the region. Therefore the CSF considers crucial to react when violation of democratic principles and human rights endangers stability. However, the role of the CSF should not be limited to expression of opinions, concrete mechanisms of cooperation between official structures and civil society on securing stability are needed.

Over the last two years, the EaP CSF was one of the most dynamic components of the Eastern Partnership initiative in its multilateral track. Its achievements are especially important as an example of self-organization of civil society, through its ability and actual capacity to support the goals of the Eastern Partnership. The contribution of the Forum in the future could be more significant, because the ability of civil society is still limited by an underestimation of its potential in the EaP process. Democratic shortcomings among NGOs in some EaP states also pose a challenge to the overall development of the CSF and its contribution to closer relations among the EU, its member states and the EaP states. The huge potential of the CSF — where delegates representing all six partner countries and the EU participate and cooperate successfully together — is insufficiently used. The ability of the delegates in the Forum to define common values, interests and goals is not transferred to the interstate level efficiently and convincingly enough.

However, it is a historical lesson, including most recent developments in Arab world, that in non-perfect or far-from democracies, politics determine the economic relations to a very high degree; the rules of the game are bent to suit the people holding power. Subordination of development of real democratic institutions to economic reform, approximation to formal EU standards, and a lack of proper conditionality both weakens the consistency of efforts to support democratization and diminishes the role of civil society.