



Eastern Partnership

Forum where voices of civil society sound loud and clear

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum is facing a major challenge – to define its role in a fast changing and diverse political landscape, as the EaP countries move in so many different directions, says **Co-Chair of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Steering Committee Krzysztof Bobiński** in an exclusive interview with the EU Neighbourhood Info Centre.

Interview with Krzysztof Bobiński



What is the role of the Civil Society Forum in the Eastern Partnership?

The CSF aims to strengthen civil society in the EaP countries and to foster cooperation and the exchange of experiences between civil society organisations from partner countries and the EU. The Forum strives to boost pluralism in public discourse and policy making, by holding governments accountable, and by promoting fundamental freedoms, participatory democracy and human rights. We also focus on communicating the goals of the EaP to the general public in the EU and partner countries.

The Forum brings together civil society organizations which monitor the situation, advocates for reforms and provide policy inputs at the national level with the ultimate goal of bringing the EaP countries closer to the EU.

How does the Forum achieve its objectives?

The Forum meets once a year to take stock of ongoing work and to agree on future activities. Each partner country has a National Platform, which unites a large number of CSOs working on the European agenda. Besides, the Forum has five Working Groups, of which four mirror the topics of the thematic multilateral platforms of the Eastern Partnership, namely:

- Democracy, human rights, good governance and stability;
- Economic integration and convergence with EU policies;
- Environment, climate change and energy security;
- Contacts between people.

The fifth Working Group of the Forum has no parallel thematic platform and focuses on social policies and social dialogue.

Representatives of the Forum attend the meetings of EaP Platforms, ministerial meetings and EaP summits, where they deliver written opinions developed by the Forum's experts.

Since 2012, the Forum has permanent participant status in the EaP multilateral platforms, in a sign of recognition by the partner country and member state governments.

The Forum has launched its own flagship initiatives in the areas of election monitoring, independent media, and the fight against corruption. A task force representing civil society organisations of the Forum took part in the observation of the Presidential elections in Armenia in February 2013 and produced a report that identified shortcomings and suggested recommendations.

The Forum is constantly monitoring progress in certain dimensions of the Eastern Partnership, such as the visa liberalisation index, media freedom index, and European Integration Index. This year, the Forum is monitoring the fulfilment of the Eastern Partnership Roadmap to the Vilnius Summit, with input from civil society into the comprehensive assessment prepared ahead of the summit.

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What is the impact of the Forum on civil society in partner countries?

One of the aims of the CSF is to build support for integration with the EU.

In this regard, the Forum's National Platforms are valuable tools which help to pursue the goals of the Eastern Partnership. How their work is accomplished depends on the position that the local government adopts. If it is positive as in Moldova or in Georgia the task is easier, and indeed in Tbilisi the CSF National Platform has been working together with the government on a pro-EU programme. But in Belarus the National Platform is barely tolerated by a government which it opposes.

Interaction with society at large on a day-to-day basis is more problematic. NGOs have their roles to play, be it producing reports or monitoring government policies. The ordinary man in the street is little aware of these activities. Any impact the CSF members can have is on elites. And in a country like Ukraine or Armenia, National Platforms play a greater role because NGOs are more trusted in society than opposition political parties. So eventually National Platforms and NGOs may have a key role to play in conducting a dialogue with the government.

What do you consider as your most important achievements?

Influencing policy or indeed public opinion is a diffuse process where it is difficult to judge progress.

What is clear is that the CSF has become an effective mechanism for channelling information from civil society to European institutions and back. Its structures, be they National Platforms or the Steering Committee, closely monitor the reform process in the EaP, serving as a watchdog, and promptly respond to developments on the ground, expressing the consolidated position of pro-European civil society organisations. In some countries, like Georgia, the National Platform has become a fully-fledged partner of the government in conducting reforms, and its expertise is routinely used by the government.

Another achievement is the institutionalisation of the Forum. The main issue for the past few years has been to establish a structure which will enable the CSF to function efficiently. Thanks to support from the European Commission the CSF has set up a secretariat in Brussels, which acts as a clearing house for initiatives from the national platforms and for information and invitations for attendance at meetings between EU governments and Eastern Partner officials. This may sound a very pedestrian achievement but it is crucial to the functioning of the CSF. Again thanks to the support of the European Commission, the institutional development of the National Platforms is on-going.

What are the biggest challenges you are facing?

With the forthcoming summit in Vilnius, the Eastern Partnership is approaching a watershed. It remains unclear if Ukraine will sign its Association Agreement with the EU, while Moldova and Georgia are moving ahead on their pro EU path. Belarus and Azerbaijan remain unconvinced as to the merits of closer association with the EU, and the rulers of these countries have little confidence in democratic forms of government. Armenia most recently made a U-turn away from its pro-European course, leaving its whole strategy up in the air.

A big challenge for the CSF will be to work out what its role will be in such a diverse political landscape, with the EaP countries moving in so many differing directions. Indeed, will we be able to stay together? These are questions for Chisinau and Vilnius this autumn.

More generally, a serious challenge is that at the national level the CSF should remain open to those organisations which want to join and not turn itself into an exclusive set of NGOs which monopolise contacts with the EU. Another great challenge is that NGOs should stay in touch with society at large and thus retain the ability to influence public opinion. If they come to be seen as a group of organisations that exist because they are externally funded, then they will soon find themselves to be isolated. But of course they must also beware of allowing themselves to become a strictly political opposition. After all, NGOs are apolitical in the sense that they do not belong to political parties.

And the CSF must be very careful that it should not allow itself to be dominated by organisations that have been set up by government officials or the government itself (GONGOs). That would really be the end of the movement.

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Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

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