

**3rd Meeting of the Steering Committee of the Civil Society Forum
12-13 June 2013**

Minutes

12 June 2013

The Steering Committee (SC) of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Civil Society Forum (CSF) held its third meeting this year in Brussels to discuss preparations for the 2013 CSF meeting in Chisinau and short-term and long-term priorities of the Forum, to share recent developments in National Platforms and Working Groups and to come up with a list of recommended participants for Chisinau Forum.

The Co-chairs Krzysztof Bobinski and Boris Navasardian opened the meeting and welcomed participants. The following members of the SC were present: Krzysztof Bobinski, Boris Navasardian, Gubad Bayramov, Yaroslav Bekish, Yaryna Borenko, Lilia Carasciuc, Anna Golubovska-Onisimova, Nikolai Kvantaliani, Hennadiy Maksak, Anar Mammadli, Mikheil Mirziashvili, Gintaras Morkis, Vera Rihackova, Olga Stuzhinskaya, Oleksandr Sushko and Kristina Vaiciunaite. The Secretariat of the SC of the EaP CSF was represented by its Director Natalia Yerashevich, Communications Manager Lucas Maurer and interns Marina Vese and Anna Kirchataya.

Strategizing about short-term and long-term priorities of the Forum and its role in the EaP

Jeff Lovitt drew the attention of the SC to the fact that in light of the increased support of the structures of the Forum recently the Forum should meet quite high expectations. This might require assessing, updating or possibly changing its strategic priorities. It would be valuable to explore how NPs see value-added of the Forum in a particular country and as a whole and incorporate this into the future strategy paper. Concerning the previous CSF strategy paper, it was underlined that much have already been achieved, especially what relates to technical/structural objectives. The next strategy should have concrete thematic objectives elaborated as well. There is also a need to critically look at flagship initiatives and to explore if they are they still relevant. In general, the Forum needs to answer the questions: where is its value-added and where it has expertise.

Mr Kostanyan from Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS) stressed that the AAs create a completely new reality and this gives the CSF new opportunities to provide added value. The AAs will establish a contractual relationship, where both sides take specific obligations. The monitoring mechanism that are set within the agreement are quite loose, therefore, there is a bigger space for civil society to take over and realise its potential in monitoring the agreements.

Boris Navasardian, the AR National Facilitator stressed the importance of the advocacy role of the Forum. He reiterated that the mission of the national platform is not only in fixing the reality but also in changing it. Furthermore, he stressed that the resistance against the EaP and AA in the EaP countries might grow, as certain interests will be damaged by the agreements. Therefore, public awareness raising and informing populations on the value that AA brings could be an important component for the CSF and NPs in particular. AR NP is currently negotiating with the government how the platform might be instrumental in EaP public awareness raising in Armenia.

Anar Mammadli informed on the situation in Azerbaijan, where civil society does not have an access the on-going negotiation process between the EU and Azerbaijani MFA. Furthermore, he identified the usage of “external enemies” in the government’s propaganda as a huge challenge to the European integration of the country and stressed the need for raising public awareness on European values.

Yaroslav Bekish, the Belarusian National Facilitator, informed that a large part of Belarusian political actors and civil society regards the invitation of the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Vilnius Summit as a step weakening the position of the EU vis-à-vis Belarusian authorities.

The Moldovan National Facilitator Lilia Carasciuc informed on the formation of a new Moldovan Government. She stressed that the NP should focus more on the promotion of European values and the EaP. She also stressed the need for capacity building in monitoring of Forum’s organisations and bringing in think tanks that can produce research and do monitoring.

Oleksandr Sushko, the Ukrainian National Facilitator, stressed that the synergies that the Forum creates is its largest value-added. Building supranational civil society policy is key. CSF should serve as a platform for promoting initiatives, positions, and actions with a supranational effect in the EaP region. The challenge here is the diversity and high rotation of the Forum delegates. The ability of the Forum to work as a supranational structure also helps the NPs making their voices heard on the national level.

The Forum should also take a lead on stimulating discussion on European integration and Association Agreements. The AAs require translation from the EU language to something more comprehensible. This role can be effectively performed by NPs and is already happening in Ukraine. In Ukraine the establishment of a new structure, civil society platform that will be a dialogue partner for the UA government and the EU is envisioned. How this structure will be formed is not known, but the fight for being included into the platform has already started.

Another challenge for the CSF as a whole identified by Mr Sushko, is the need to retain human resources, which tend to get lost due to the rotation of members of the CSF. More attention should be paid to preparing new delegates of the Forum, for whom it takes up to a year to get acquainted with the work of the Forum. To address this NPs should be organising preparatory sessions for new delegates before Chisinau Forum.

Mikheil Mirziashvili informed that in Georgia the dialogue with the government is happening on the level of Working Groups of the National Platform.

During the discussion, the need for a better mobilisation of the EU members of the Forum was stressed by Vera Rihackova in order to generate more support for the EaP and the CSF in EU MS. It is important to use the advocacy capacity of EU organisations to influence opinions in the capitals and to keep enthusiasm for the EaP among MS. Ms Rihackova also mentioned that the Forum should focus its work on generating expertise and delivering it at relevant points in the EU and EaP countries. However, some concerns on turning the CSF into a professional monitoring structure were voiced.

Due to the fact that a new Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy might soon be replacing Commissioner Füle, it was reiterated that the support of the Commissioner and his Cabinet should not be taken for granted. The discussions in Brussels on reforming the position of the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy and taking the Neighbourhood Policy out of his portfolio were brought up at the meeting.

With regard to this it was decided to react to these developments and take a position on the proposed change.

Jeff Lovitt summarised the debate by first identifying existential questions that were discussed: the future of the EaP in general; the Civil Society Forum, and EU attitude vis-a-vis EaP countries. Capacity and expertise were identified as key to the future operation of the Forum. Thus assessing all the streams of funding that are targeted at building the capacity of the Forum and finding out if they are relevant might be worthwhile.

Among Forum priorities, monitoring, policy development, public awareness, exchange of opinions and consolidated attention to the pertinent problems of the region were mentioned. However, expertise should be balanced with values when selecting thematic priorities.

On procedure for devising the strategy, it was mentioned that the process should be as inclusive as possible without being diluted. The role of NPs and WGs should be defined and indicators/benchmarks should be established. The assessment of the Forum's operations, its internal regulation and its relevance is necessary after four years of existence. The task force to further strategy discussions and work on draft a strategy for the Forum was set up (Oleksandr Sushko, Krzysztof Bobinski, Kristina Vaiciunaite, Hennadyi Maksak, Mikheil Mirziashvili, Nikolai Kvantaliani, Boris Navasardian, Vera Rihackova, and Natalia Yerashevich).

EaP Roadmap monitoring & CSF National Platforms Strengthening project

Jeff Lovitt from PASOS and Victor Cotruta from REC Moldova updated participants on the EaP Roadmap monitoring project and the CSF National Platforms Strengthening project. Mr Lovitt informed that an interim roadmap monitoring report should be presented at the EaP Foreign Ministers Meeting on 22 July, while the final report including a two-page policy brief for each EaP country should be ready ahead of the Chisinau Forum. He stressed that one major problem of the Roadmap monitoring was that the experts working on it have not been identified in each country.

Mr Cotruta informed on the budget for the Roadmap monitoring (€35.000), €3.000 of which are available for the monitoring in each country, including translation of the report to the national language.

Selection of participants for Chisinau Forum

The SC reviewed the voting lists of NPs, WG Coordinators and EU Delegation submitted to select the participants for the Chisinau Forum on 4-5 October 2013. The Committee made sure that the required percentage on the number of new participants is reached and that each national delegation and Working Group is balanced. The final list of participants will be shortly sent to EEAS for the final approval, after which the participants will be officially informed on their selection.

13 June 2013

Meeting with Philip Mikos

Philip Mikos, head of Unit for regional programmes for the Neighbourhood East, informed that the Commission is in the middle of programming for the new financial framework and that the regional strategy will be developed by the Commission together with EEAS in early 2014, when

there will be formal consultations with stakeholders. At the Steering Committee meeting Mr Mikos had an informal exchange of opinions on the strategy with the Steering Committee and took note of their views.

With regard to regional programmes, Mr Mikos informed that the new strategy will be similar to the current one and the largest part of the ENP East funding will be used for the EaP and will be distributed among the priorities of the four EaP platforms. Another priority is supporting the regional dimension of civil society: the Forum, networking, capacity-building, etc.

In bilateral dimension the focus on civil society will remain and the level of funding is planned to be maintained. The support of civil society is planned to be streamlined in bilateral cooperation. The bulk of the funds will be provided to EaP countries through budget support programmes, therefore civil society is encouraged to provide oversight of the public spending in their countries. EU Delegations will be working with civil society through CSF National Platforms on strengthening its role in budget oversight.

Mr Mikos stressed that roadmaps on engaging the civil society at country levels are being developed at the moment by the EU Delegations. The input of civil society is much appreciated. Also the roadmaps will be an opportunity to coordinate better with member states on support of the civil society on the country level.

During Q&A session the members of the Steering Committee noted that the capacity building of the civil society in general and further support to the institutional development of the structures of the Forum is key. It was also stressed that increasing the capacity of local organisations to apply for EC funding is important. Therefore, specific trainings on how to write proposals and manage projects continue to be relevant. It was noted that more coordination when supporting the civil society among and with EU member states is necessary.

On the question of transparency of budgetary support, Mr Mikos mentioned that the general information on budgetary support is public. However, he advised for the civil society to continue a constructive dialogue with national governments for greater transparency. The EU funding, the leverage that it brings together with pressure from the civil society might incentivise some governments to become more transparent on budgets.

To the concern about recipients of the Facility funding being large consortia or even private companies rather than genuine NGOs, Mr Mikos responded that it would be good to monitor the tendencies in this regard and see the types of lead applicants and project set-ups on a year-on-year basis rather than from an annual perspective. He also stressed that as the new financial regulations will allow for sub-granting, a stronger role of local organisations in large regional projects led by international NGOs will be possible.

Meeting with Martin Hagström

Martin Hagström, head of the Eastern Europe Division of the Swedish MFA, emphasised that Sweden, having initiated Eastern Partnership together with Poland, continues to see big value in it and will continue to support the developments in the region. Though still being work-in-progress, the Forum has initiated a number of valuable projects such as monitoring the pace of reforms in EaP countries with the help of indices produced by the Forum and suggested presenting the results of the monitoring at official meetings that CSF is invited to. Mr Hagström shared his hopes that the CSF will continue to serve as a platform for dialogue with the local governments and a generator of new ideas. Mr Hagström underlined the importance of the CSF

input to the Foreign Ministers Meeting taking place on 22 July in Brussels and to the declaration of the Vilnius Summit the preparation of which has already started. Mr Hagström reiterated the importance of the CSF in promoting European values in the EaP countries and in ensuring the visibility of the programme in general.

At the same time he stressed that the CSF could use its official role more efficiently by providing its input at exactly the right time. Concerning the CSF participation in EaP Platform and Panel meetings he stressed that the input should be provided at least two weeks ahead of the meeting to allow for national delegations to develop official positions on the CSF input and to build momentum around it.

Martin Hagström stressed the important role of the National Platforms as fora for the dialogue of civil society with governments and expressed his hope that the requirement for such a dialogue will be written down into the Association Agreements.

Mr Hagström acknowledged the continuity of the Swedish interest in Eastern Partnership and mentioned that Sweden will appoint a special EaP ambassador to the region, will open new Embassies in Baku and Yerevan and hopefully will soon be able to return its Embassy personnel to Minsk. He also mentioned that SIDA is currently developing a new strategy for 2014-2020 that will be more closely linked to the EaP and European integration and that will continue to have civil society as a major focus.

Meeting with Cameron Fraser

The SC met with Cameron Fraser, a board member of the EU-Russia CSF (<http://www.eu-russia-csf.org/>) to discuss opportunities for mutual cooperation.

Mr Fraser informed the SC on the structure and activities of the EU-Russia CSF and on behalf of his organisation expressed interest to cooperate with EaP CSF and all stakeholders active in the region. He suggested organising a panel on what is happening with civil society in Russia and how it affects EaP during the Chisinau Forum. The final agreement was for the both Steering Committees to discuss this matter internally and get into contact with each other again.

Preparation for the Chisinau Forum

The SC has worked out a detailed agenda of the Chisinau Forum focusing on the essence of the thematic panels and experts that might be invited for them: http://www.eap-csf.eu/assets/files/Chisinau/AGENDA_CSF_Chisinau.doc

Vilnius Summit side-event discussion

Kristina Vaiciunaite presented the plans for the civil society side-event to the Vilnius Summit. Ms Vaiciunaite also informed about the availability of the slots for side-events. Anar Mammadli voiced his intention to submit a concept for a side event dedicated to the situation in Azerbaijan.

Meeting with Commissioner Füle

The SC met with the Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Stefan Füle, who stressed that in terms of the structure the Forum has reached the maturity and that he was content that within the EaP there is hardly any policy field in which civil society is not present. He identified the Association Agreements (AAs) as the most important transformation instrument the EU has at its disposal and underlined that the CSF needs to be

involved in the implementation of the agreements and also that civil society should be involved in informing the general public about the AAs. In this respect he stressed that civil society needs to be ambitious but also realistic at the same time.

For the Vilnius Summit he identified three main deliverables. First, the AA with UA should be signed, although at the moment there is still a lack of willingness from the UA side to reflect fully the conditions set out in the FAC Conclusions of 10 December. Furthermore, the agreements with AR, GE and MD should be initialled, to allow for signing before October 2014. Second, DCFTAs are an important transformative instrument that will allow creating an integrated economic zone. Commissioner Füle also touched upon relations with Russia and mentioned that during EU consultations with Russia in March this year the topic of neighbourhood was raised for the first time.

Commissioner Füle informed that there might not be a new Roadmap developed after the Summit, but that the monitoring efforts of the CSF should continue and shift to the Association Agendas. Ways to include the civil society in the process of setting up these agendas should be found. Commissioner Füle also stressed that the civil society will continue to be involved in the European Dialogue on Modernisation with BY and that the invitation of government officials on a technical level will not reduce the role of the civil society.

Statements adopted by the SC

The SC adopted a statement in support of the signature of the EU-UA Association Agreement. It can be found here: <http://www.eap-csf.eu/assets/files/Documents/AA%20signing%20essential.pdf>

AOB

The AR NP informed that the secretariat of the NP is operational since 3 June and that sectoral cooperation with the government has been established. In each ministry people have been appointed as contact points for civil society and are required by the government to react to its requests.

As there are many cross-cutting issues between different WGs, especially between WG1 and WG5 as well as WG1 and WG4, the possibility for sub-groups to include participants from different WGs should be explored.

It was agreed that the next meeting of the SC shall take place in the first week of September in Kiev.

Minutes produced by:

Secretariat of the Steering Committee of the
Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
info@eap-csf.eu