

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP CIVIL SOCIETY CONFERENCE (RIGA, MAY 20-21)

Many things have changed since the Eastern Partnership was initiated in May 2009. The process of European Neighborhood Policy review was officially initiated this year. The Riga Eastern Partnership Summit and its side event – Eastern Partnership Civil Society Conference – is the right and appropriate venue to assess the achievements and challenges, as well as to calibrate approaches and instruments of the Eastern dimension of EU's Neighborhood Policy.

Current EaP policy is determined both by the EU institutions' and Member States' level of interest in the neighborhood policy on the one hand, and the six target countries' differing willingness to use these policies to their advantage on the other. Apart from this, the EaP has been significantly affected by the Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, which seriously challenges the EU's attempts to stabilize its neighborhood.

Anti-European propaganda has been strengthened noticeably in the context of aggression. Holding a competent information policy is crucial to promote European values and tools in countering the propaganda and strong discredit efforts by negative-minded elements.

The 'more for more' principle in the EaP policy has given certain results – Association Agreements between the EU and three partner countries have been signed and provisionally applied. Mobility will remain one of the important areas of cooperation between the EU and the six Eastern European partners. Visa-free regime with Moldova since April 2014 has been operating effectively. Other Eastern European partner countries also are making progress in the areas of visa liberalization and enhancing mobility. Despite their less ambitious level of cooperation with the EU, the Union is continuing to engage with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus in those sectors where it is possible.

Potential for multilateral cooperation has not been used to the full extent in the Eastern Partnership framework. Interaction between the EU and its six partners should move from its bilateral focus to the next level – the use of multilateral cooperation instruments.

Excessive marginalization of civil society is a threat not only to the promotion of European values but also to all aspects of European and regional cooperation. On the positive side, multilateral cooperation can become a driving force in the implementation of ideas of the Eastern Partnership and European values.



By holding the EaP Civil Society Conference in Riga on May 20-21, 2015, the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union continues to emphasize the vital role of the civil society in the democratization process in EaP countries. In anticipation of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga on 21-22 May, and aiming to contribute to the discussion on the Review of the European Neighborhood Policy at the end of 2015, the participants of the EaP Civil Society Conference in Riga have adopted the following recommendations to Eastern Partnership policy planners and implementers:

Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership

The EU should aim to support reform-minded national actors, who want to advance real reforms, across all EaP states. The EU should continue to ensure a place for civil society in the planning and implementation of the EaP policy agenda. This must include; providing feedback about initiatives that are not taken on board, and making tripartite dialogues between the EU, EaP governments and the civil society as mandatory and integral to the process. The role of the civil society in monitoring and oversight of the EU support to the EaP governments should be strengthened everywhere.

The recent tendency of governments to abstain from reforms that are politically unpopular means that the civil society has a crucial role to play in monitoring changes and in ensuring more transparency and public oversight in areas vital to strong and functioning democracy and economy.

Civil society should be more actively involved in planning of EaP policies and forms of dialogue that so far have been reserved for governmental representatives. Inclusion of members from civil society in the EaP summits could be one example.

- Before summits, the governments should consult with representatives of civil society;
- Participation of civil society in the policy making process on the national and international level of the EaP should be ensured.

Improving the EU's engagement with different society groups in EaP countries

The Eastern Partnership should contribute to the further integration of minorities within EaP societies. The role of civil society in this process is invaluable, but requires positive attitude and support from governments and international organizations.



Already existing cooperation between representatives of EaP countries and the EU, should be developed to create opportunities for inclusive dialogue involving different religious, social, cultural, ethnic sexual minorities, and vulnerable groups such as; returned and readmitted migrants, women, vulnerable age groups and people from rural areas.

Capacity building and ensuring safe areas for the above-mentioned groups is vital.

Good Governance and Accountability

The dialogue on the EU integration should be institutionalized in a participatory and inclusive manner and include the involvement of opposition forces.

All decisions taken at EaP summits should be made trilaterally and include the EU EaP national governments and civil society. The consultation process should be transparent.

A code of good practice for civil society participation in decision-making processes by the Council of Europe should be translated into all languages of the EaP partner countries and then implemented.

Improving accountability in EaP countries

Existing mechanisms of cooperation with civil society are insufficiently inclusive and are often implemented on an *ad hoc* basis.

- Communication between civil society and governments on the national and EaP level should be institutionalized and should take place regularly.
- The role of the EU Delegations in the follow up of consultations with civil society must be changed in order to ensure that CSO recommendations on EaP related processes are taken into consideration by national authorities.
- It is necessary to create working groups including representatives of civil society, the national government and the EU to closely follow the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of EaP related processes, reforms and EU budget support to Eastern Partnership governments. The involvement of civil society representatives shall be implemented with a special focus on existing cooperation tools working in a transparent and inclusive manner.



- The consultations should cover issues such as the spending priorities of budget support measures linked to concrete deliverables and regular reporting on implementation of programs implemented by governments at the national level.
- The quality and effectiveness of reforms, and their transparency, cost effectiveness and external evaluation must be ensured.
- Accessibility to funding for civil society for the purpose of monitoring EaP related activities and reforms should be improved.

Necessary changes include more transparency, application of the rule of law to all legislative initiatives with a balance of power and active involvement of civil society; demonopolisation and reform of the economy towards a sustainable job creation and growth. EaP government administrations should establish standing joint committees with civil society representatives to monitor the progress of reforms, and provide an early warning system for human rights violation issues in mutual relations.

The EU member states, and people of good will, in the EaP countries should apply all instruments at their disposal to push for the immediate release of all political prisoners, and place civil liberties and human rights at the center of the Eastern Partnership initiative, and thus ensure that there is a favorable environment for its operation.

Sustainability and sources of support to civil society in EaP countries

An enabling environment and sustainable finances are crucial for civil society and their role in transformative processes.

- Institutional sustainability: the development of civil society is impossible without full rights of assembly, association and free speech. These rights are particularly violated in Azerbaijan and Belarus, where prosecution for political reasons still is actively used by governments. These important issues should be addressed respectively by national authorities and the EU.
- The EU must provide the CSOs from the six Eastern partners the funding necessary to participate in European CSO networks and their events.
- EU should address the growing problem of government controlled NGOs, known as GONGOs, which are a direct threat to the independent nature of civil society.



- EU budget support (direct support paid to the state budgets) should be made conditional on the EaP governments assuring conditions for domestic funding for NGOs which would ensure their long-term sustainability.
- These would include the EU allocating a bigger share of its funding for the EaP to CSOs.
- An element of voluntarism should be encouraged in all EaP countries as part of any EU funded project.

States should support CSOs to diversify their sources of funding, for example, by creating the necessary mechanisms to fund the Civil Society from the state without influencing them (such as taxes, a percentage of national lottery proceeds, encouraging the business sector to and crowd funding and foreign donors).

Economic Modernization and Social Issues

The EaP should build on the good practices under which civil society has provided thorough policy analysis and recommendations in the three countries that signed AAs incl. DCFTAs, and create cross-regional peer learning with Enlargement countries as well as with those in the Southern EU Neighborhood.

It is important to ensure that fund-management bodies involving EU funding for economic reform and development also involve NGO representatives and support for capacity building of professional associations in different business sectors, support economic diplomacy development of EaP countries and encourage more “business to business” initiatives as well as joint actions of business representation bodies (such as chambers of commerce in EaP and EU countries).

It is important for all sectors to learn to cooperate. For the civil society, it is important to have a strong private sector and active public sector on the board as well. Social entrepreneurship is one way to foster link between third and private sectors. At the same time both the process, and the outcomes, should get enough attention. Funds should be spent effectively and there should be balance between trust and control. Certain areas might need more attention than others depending on the countries, e.g. equality, environment, youth etc. Same concepts might mean different things to different parties and that should be taken into account while analyzing and evaluating the outcomes.



It would also be useful to involve business organizations from the 3 EaP countries that signed DCFTAs as observers in the EU bodies. EaP should include EU-focused academic and training programs for public servants and civil society, especially in those areas covered by AAs where civil societies are less experienced compared with fundamental EU value areas.

Civil society should take advantage of innovative approaches while tackling the social problems, e.g. social entrepreneurship, various networks, motivating and engaging disadvantaged people. EaP could start with small steps leading to big outcomes. International cooperation and lesson learning from other countries could be in the center of the process.

Balancing social inclusion and modernization in EaP countries

The EaP must include compensation and support mechanism for the areas of reform that have an immediate negative impact on the population. Such mechanisms were in place for new Member States when they were undertaking similar reforms and it is a key factor in avoiding reform fatigue and keeping society on board the reform agenda. Governments should promote dialogue to explain the medium and long-term benefits of economic reforms.

Trans-border Cooperation

EU Central and Eastern European States and the six Eastern Partners share common experience of rebuilding their states and societies after breakdown of the Soviet Communist bloc. Thus, cooperation within the region is vital so that the countries that have advanced more on the path of reforms can share their best practices and solutions, and support their neighbors, both directly and in the framework of the EU and other international organizations.

Trans-border cooperation will be supported by giving a clear visionary and supportive message at the political level and to every person who is affected by the EaP initiative. It is crucial to involve civil society in monitoring and evaluation of all trans-border cooperation initiatives, since the political parties or other actors have less credibility with the society than NGOs do.

Conceptual improvements to existing trans-border cooperation programs

In trans-border cooperation among the EU Central and Eastern European members and the six Eastern Partners, it is now necessary to implement some conceptual changes:

- Go deeper, expanding to new subjects and topics.



- Reach wider, expanding opportunities (incl. funding opportunities) beyond well-established NGOs by focusing on grass roots movements.
- Engage in true dialogue, making sure that trans-border cooperation and exchange enables mutual (two-way) learning between the EU and the EaP parties.
- Funding must be prioritized according to the regional demands and ambitions of the specific EaP states (e.g., in projects with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine it is important to focus on monitoring and implementation of Association Agreements; in projects with Azerbaijan and Armenia, it is necessary to focus on confidence-building).
- In line with the calls for greater multilateral cooperation, it is also necessary to promote experience sharing among the six Eastern Partners on the best practices and also the mistakes committed.
- Support for civil society in Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan must be de-coupled from the commitments of the respective governments. Trans-border cooperation projects mean an additional way to engage these countries and their societies and must be supported as such.
- A cross-border related advocacy platform must be developed to uphold these and other proposals.

Improvements to support cross-border cooperation at the technical level

It is crucial to ensure better coordination between donors working on trans-border cooperation. Right now, it is mostly based on personal relations, but such coordination must be systematic, including, for instance, common meetings, sharing information on permanent basis, co-funding projects and jointly improving project documentation. Trans-border cooperation in the Eastern Partnership region will definitely benefit from coordination with non-EU donors.

- The EU should consider channeling funds to donors with experience and “on-the-ground” knowledge about trans-border cooperation.
- The EU should give more support for grassroots initiatives and small NGOs by streamlining and easing the application procedure for EaP trans-border cooperation projects.



- The EU must also continue its support to projects increasing interconnectivity in the 28+6 Eastern Partnership region (e.g., infrastructure), thus supporting trans-border cooperation in the broadest meaning of the term.
- It is recommended to create an Eastern Partnership Regional Fund, modeled on the Balkan Regional Fund and supported by the 28+6 Eastern Partnership countries, in order to support local trans-border cooperation projects.
- Additionally, it is important to tap into non-financial/not-grant-based solutions for trans-border cooperation (providing enabling environment, supporting corporate social responsibility and civic-private partnerships, developing crowd-funding platforms).

Mobility Issues

The Eastern Partnership summit in Riga should propose a visa free regime for Georgia and Ukraine from January 1, 2016, that will enable citizens of the two countries to see for themselves the false nature of anti-EU propaganda and to enhance business ties with the EU. It will also be a tangible success for the Eastern Partnership program and an important argument for these countries to stay on the pro-European path. The mutual benefits of closer European integration must be given priority in all Partner countries without differentiation with respect to the level of progress at the governmental level. The EU should continue to treat the Partner countries on an equal basis, consistently applying the “more for more” principle to reward reform champions.

In order to obtain visa-free regime, both Georgia and Ukraine, like Moldova, which already has visa abolition, have implemented a number of systemic reforms, making their countries safer, better governed and closer to the EU in many areas. Measures for tackling corruption, discrimination, trafficking in human beings have been introduced. Most of all, modern and efficient border and migration management systems have been elaborated, reducing the risk of unwelcome migration from Georgia and Ukraine. The conflict in Eastern Ukraine should not be considered an obstacle as the reforms already put in place by Ukraine have contributed to the resolution of many of the country’s security problems.

The legal procedures needed to waive visa requirements should be accelerated and the respective decisions should be made at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga. These should be followed by a European Council vote at the earliest possible opportunity.



Academic exchanges and youth mobility

It is necessary to give access to the Eastern Partnership countries in the following programs:

- Europe for Citizens
- Creative Europe
- Digital Agenda for Europe

Additionally,

- Quality implementation of the initiative Youth Window of Eastern Partnership must be ensured.
- The Eastern Partnership should be made a priority in the ERASMUS+ program. All sub-programs of ERASMUS+ must be opened up for all Eastern Partnership countries, and the budget for projects with partners from Eastern Partnership countries must be increased.
- It is necessary to setup a financing mechanism to improve the academic quality of EaP higher education and research institutions by supporting language trainings, attending conferences and workshops in the EU and also long-term research fellowships.

Recommendations to the consular missions of the EU member states

It is important to ensure greater respect of the existing regulations (EU Visa Code, VFA). In particular:

- The Consular missions should considerably increase the number of multiple-entry/long-term visas.
- The Consular missions should avoid issuing single-entry or short-term visas to applicants with positive visa record.
- The Consular missions should ensure the right to apply via external service providers or directly to consular establishments. The Consular mission should improve the appeal procedure by making it easier and less expensive.



- The Consular mission should ensure adequate information provision regarding the existing norms and standards of current visa regulations.

Recommendations to the European Commission, EEAS and governments of the EU member states and the six Partner States

- The EU members should make a commitment to introduce visa free regime as soon as all the technical criteria listed in VLAP are fully met.
- The EC should provide additional statistic parameters enabling better assessments of the implementation of the most sensitive provisions of the Visa Code and the VFA should be established; in particular, an indicator of issued visas valid for more than one year should be introduced.
- The EC should review the EU Migration policy and ensure a differentiated approach towards different EaP countries.
- The Ukrainian and Georgian Governments should commit themselves to fulfilling all the criteria by the end of this year.

Regional Security

Illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia and military aggression in Eastern Ukraine has shown that security is indeed an important issue in the EaP region. The EU has a responsibility to address the security threats in the EaP region and do this in the framework of EaP policy. It is necessary to explore the possibility of better incorporating the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in the context of the EaP. Also the relations between EU and NATO and the EaP countries relationship with NATO have to be developed to address the common threats more effectively. Active and frozen conflicts, hybrid threats that are affecting the EaP countries and their EU neighbors should be addressed more actively by the EU, NATO and the EaP countries.

Civil society can contribute through monitoring and actions in confidence-building that can be complemented with harder incentives such as economic and political cooperation. EU should make more of the human resources and skills in the EaP countries when the government is unable to fulfill all the necessary state functions.

EU actors with experiences of protracted conflicts can support the reconciliation efforts within



the EaP societies as soon as the fighting subsides.

Future of the Eastern Partnership

The Riga Eastern Partnership Summit must take a clear position on membership perspective for the countries that are implementing the Association Agreements.

In order to keep all partner countries on board, in the spirit of inclusiveness, a differentiated approach must be adopted. This should take into account national circumstances.

The “more for more” principle should apply not only to governments but also to the organized civil society. The EU should provide new impetus to the multilateral track of the Eastern Partnership initiative, and to agree on more economic incentives that will be mutually beneficial for the Partner countries.

Support awareness building of forums such as Euronest and EaP CSF among professional and business organizations and thus and engage more actors in the implementation of EaP initiatives.

Current circumstances dictate the necessity for EU adding a more strategic approach towards the EaP and neighboring regions that would support already existing and acknowledged normative power. Proper policy communication is needed to address growing challenges of anti-European propaganda aimed to undermine the EU’s attractiveness and normative power.

In addition to its attractive normative power, The EU should increase its engagement in the resolution of the ongoing “frozen” or protracted conflicts in the region, which pose a lasting obstacle to democracy and EU integration, as well as leverage for manipulation and interference by the Russian government.

Even if Russia were to be informed about the outcome of DCFTA implementation talks between the EU and partner states, the EU’s relations with partner states must remain a bilateral process, without inserting Russia as a third party. Otherwise, this could be interpreted as undermining trust in governing structures at the EaP national level, and in the EU as a partner.

It is necessary to engage more actors outside the capital cities and empower them through cooperation, and to support bottom-up locally owned and led awareness-raising campaigns and Europe-focused debates.



The EU must make the implementation of the three Association Agreements, incl. DCFTAs, successful in the signatory countries, and involve the other three Eastern partners, where possible, at first as observers in order to build trust and then as partners. The EU must be present at all levels, through visits of political representatives, and it must always engage civil society representatives.

The EU should also recognize that, essentially, successful implementation of EaP agreements must lead to membership in the EU for those willing and choosing such a political process. The EU should remain open and inclusive – based on its own founding principles and following its motto “United in Diversity”.

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