

Minutes of the Steering Committee Meeting

21-22 May 2015, Riga

In attendance: Steering Committee members - Krzysztof Bobinski, Andrei Yahorau, Oleg Shatberashvili, Lasha Tughushi, Plamena Borisova, Hovsep Khurshudyan, Daiva Kvedaraite, Mikayel Hovhanisyan, Sabit Bagirov, Ion Manole (replacing Ion Guzun), and Viktor Taran.

Secretariat - Director of the Secretariat, Natalia Yerashevich (ex officio member of the SC), the Advocacy and Membership Manager, Tanya Basarab, and Communication Manager Darya Mustafayeva.

Summary of discussion, decisions and conclusions

a. Selection process of the participants to the annual meeting of the EaP CSF

In advance of the selection of the participants for the annual meeting in Kyiv in November 2015, the Coordinators of National Platforms has shared how the voting by National Platforms is carried out. The vote of the National Platform has an equal weight to the vote of the EU delegation and the one of the Working Group Coordinators. The process is different in every country. While in Azerbaijan all members of the National Platform vote for the applicants, in Ukraine the voting is only done by the Coordination Council of the National Platform and in Moldova – by the heads of the Working Groups. The decision was **to circulate the regulations of all NPs so that at a later stage best practices can be recommended for the adoption by National Platforms. Andrey Yahorau and the Secretariat will work on the best practises paper.** It was also decided to **put in writing the detailed procedure for elections. The draft will be discussed at the next SC meeting.**

It was agreed **to pay more attention to one of the main criteria in the selection - active participation in the activities of the National Platform - to ensure that only people who are active in the Platform will be selected to attend the annual meeting of the Forum.**

It was decided that **the members of the Steering Committee should state if they are related to any of the applicants to avoid conflict of interest.**

b. Planning of the Annual Assembly in Kyiv

There was a first round of brainstorming of potential topics for the Annual Assembly. The **task force** from Steering Committee members was set up to work with the secretariat **on organising the assembly:** Andrei Yahorau, Lasha Tughushi, Mikayel Hovhanisyan, Oleg Shatberashvili, Krzysztof Bobinski, Hovsep Khurshudyan and Victor Taran.

It was suggested that the Annual Assembly needs to change the format to allow for a more productive meeting. Mikayel Hovhanisyan has developed a detailed proposal for discussion at the next SC meeting.

It was agreed that the Assembly should focus on discussing the role of civil society in transformation process in the EaP, aiming to set a regional agenda, to develop joint cooperation initiatives, to assess the year and to discuss why certain things are not working yet. One idea was also to organise a project fair where people can share good practice and present results of what they are engaged with.

c. Discussion on the CSO situation in Azerbaijan

Many organisations are pressured by the government; their bank accounts being frozen. The level of pressure depends on the field of activity – CSOs working on democracy promotion are extremely limited in their activities, while those working with SMEs are under less pressure.

EU Delegation in Baku announced several calls for proposals, however under the new rules in order for the CSOs to be able to apply for these grants the delegation has to receive the approval of the Ministry of Justice first. Another issue for CSOs is the cost of the grant application process as under the new regulation each page of the CSO project proposal has to be translated and notarised before submission to the Ministry of Justice. The detailed procedure of registration was translated into English and is available at the EaP CSF website.

As a result of the new NGO funding rules, the number of GONGOs is growing, as more and more CSOs have to apply for government funding.

The situation with political prisoners is also deteriorating as the number of CSOs activists, journalists and bloggers who are jailed on politically motivated charges is growing. The Co-Chairs of the Steering Committee signed a letter addressed to Ilham Aliyev urging him to take steps towards normalizing the conditions for the CSOs work in Azerbaijan.

d. Exchange with Vassilis Maragos, DG NEAR, Head of Unit for Regional Programmes Neighbourhood East

In light of ENP review Mr Maragos pointed out that there is no discussion on prosperity versus freedom as one does not exist without the other. He also underlined the importance of the cross-border cooperation on the local level and of the link with constituencies as part of ENP. Mr Maragos mentioned that a clear picture of the civil society composition in EaP based on the Council of Europe standards is needed. Monitoring of DCFTA implementation in Ukraine, flexible funding opportunities for CSOs, Bologna Process road map for Belarus and EU communications strategy in EaP countries were among the discussed issues.

e. Short updates from National Platforms

The Armenian NP has grown by 6 new organisations out of which 3 are from the regions; and now counts 197 members. In February-March 2015, NP had several consultations with the Ministry of Justice on the revision of the NGO law.

The Azeri NP currently counts 58, out of which approx. 30 are active. The new procedure for the registration of foreign funding was discussed. The procedure was forwarded to the DG Near.

The Belarus NP advocacy efforts resulted in the country being accepted to the Bologna process on the conditional basis. Belarus now has to implement the measures specified in the 3-year roadmap. The civil society will be actively monitoring the implementation of the roadmap.

The Working Groups of the **Georgian NP** has been actively meeting with relevant ministries and developing the draft of how the new civil society platform under the AA should be structured.

Members of **the Moldovan NP** that counts approx. 60 members conducted 40 seminars in rural areas to explain the AA focusing on the regions populated by the minorities, as well as holding the seminars for the business people to explain how to adapt in the new realities of the AA.

The Georgian and Moldovan representatives of the Committee stressed the negative tendency of **growing pro-Russian sentiments** in these countries. It was agreed that based on the data from the countries, the Secretariat will compile a brief on the situation to attract more attention of the decision-makers.

f. Planning of regional activities for NPs:

It was agreed that Lasha Tughushi, Victor Taran and Ion Guzun would discuss together ideas that should be part of the capacity building. The secretariat would come forward with a proposal for what is possible with the budget remaining under this line “regional activities of National Platforms”. In essence, three blocks would be important and relevant at least to Georgia and Ukraine: visa liberalization, economic cooperation under DCFTA and the reforms under AA.

It was also agreed that while more participants from the three countries should attend, there should also be a good presence from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus NPs so they can hear what is happening in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the challenges that the governments and civil society face and the dynamics around the implementation of AA/DCFTA (including the establishment of bilateral monitoring platforms which should complement the multilateral cooperation). It was agreed to try to hold an event for 50 people, depending on what the budget allows and to look at:

- Content and results of monitoring AA/DCFTA implementation
- How CSOs are working with it (not only monitoring but also using it as an agenda for engagement with policy makers).

Lasha Tughushi will send a concept of the event by 20th June.

g. On Working Group Councils:

There was a brief round of assessment of Working Group Council meetings, since these were established in Batumi and held their first meeting.



Overall there was an opinion that this format is interesting to discuss issues have a proper linkage to the Working Groups at the country level. Several Coordinators were sceptical from the start but now see the establishment of the Councils as a good step. One challenge posed by the new structure is the difficulty to engage subgroup coordinators who are not part of the Councils.

h. Next SC meeting; September, Tbilisi combined with the regional event for NPs.

Adopted on 19 June 2015