

**Annual Meeting of Working Group 1
“Democracy, Human Rights, Good Governance & Stability“**

Brussels, 17 June 2014

Minutes of the Meeting

The CSF Working Group 1 on Democracy, Human Rights, Good Governance and Stability convened for its annual meeting in Brussels on 17 June. Some 80 participants, including civil society organisations from the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries and the EU, representatives of the European External Action Service and the European Commission and independent observers came together for the event. The meeting was chaired by **Jeff Lovitt** (PASOS), the WG's EU coordinator, and **Leila Alieva** (Centre for National and International Studies), the WG's EaP coordinator.

1. Opening

In his introductory remarks, **Jeff Lovitt**, noted increased visibility of the Forum and its activities, notably due to participation of its members in the meetings of the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly and the Council of Europe, as well as exchanges with the European Commission and European External Action Service and Steering Committee meetings with Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle. He has drawn the audience's attention to Anar Mammadli's case - imprisoned former Working Group 1 coordinator and prominent civil society activist nominated by the Steering Committee for the Vaclav Havel Prize presented by the CoE Parliamentary Assembly. He appealed to the participants to actively engage in the WG activities and contribute its input to the Forum's strategy 2015-2017.

2. The future of the Eastern Partnership and support to civil society in the EaP countries - presentations by external speakers

Richard Tibbels, Head of Division for the Eastern Partnership, Regional Cooperation and OSCE at the European External Action Service, provided an update on the progress in bilateral relations with the EaP countries: specific effort on Ukraine (immediate IMF and EU assistance package to help the Ukrainian government cope with the situation; close work with the OSCE to urge Russia stabilise situation in eastern Ukraine; established EU agenda for reform; political provisions of the Association Agreement signed in March, economic part due to be signed on 27 June; the EU-Ukraine civil society platform to be established to assist with and monitor the implementation of the Agreement); Association Agreements with Georgia and Moldova also to be signed on 27 June; work in progress on the visa facilitation and readmission agreement with Belarus, inclusion of the Belarusian authorities in the Dialogue on Modernisation; discussions on possibility of signing of a Strategic Modernisation Partnership agreement with Azerbaijan; work underway on the agreement towards a new legal basis for bilateral relations with Armenia.

He also outlined the EU's approach to the EaP multilateral track following Vilnius summit. The following priority areas that the EU takes forward on the path to Riga summit were mentioned: **implementation** of the Association Agreements (effective implementation will send a positive signal to citizens of the EaP countries, but also to Russia; requires huge work on the part of the governments); **differentiation between partner countries** (remains the priority approach towards the EaP countries; full support to Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova that are going in for the full agenda and signing the Association Agreements; no fully-fledged relations with Belarus due to political prisoners; reconfiguring the relationship with Armenia; difficult relationship with Azerbaijan due to its slow advancement in terms of value agenda); comprehensive **communication** about the Association Agreements and the EU objectives in the region (work on 'demystification' of the

Association Agreements, tackling Russian misinformation about what the EU is doing towards the EaP countries; vital role of civil society in getting the messages across in this difficult environment); and **clear messaging** in relationship with Russia (maintaining a twofold relationship with Russia – commitment to political-level dialogue to explain the EU policy in the EaP region along with consistent messaging on what the EU considers unacceptable - legal annexation of Crimea and escalation of the situation in Ukraine).

In conclusion, Tibbels reassured the audience that the EaP will remain a priority for the EU and noted that Riga summit might become a new milestone in the process of democracy and market economy approximation. In the meantime, he encouraged the civil society organisations to make the most of the available exchanges and opportunities (Erasmus, exchanges and funding instruments for civil society).

Whilst the participants generally agreed that there was a need for greater differentiation between partner countries in order to allow for “different speeds”, concerns have been voiced whether the multilateral cooperation remains an effective tool for implementing the objectives agreed in the Vilnius Declaration. A number of voices have been raised in favour of revision of the EaP initiative with account for the changing political and security circumstances. A WG participant from Azerbaijan called on the EU officials to put up the issue of political prisoners in Azerbaijan on the agenda of the EU-Azerbaijan relations. He noted the devaluating role of the civil society in Azerbaijan due to challenges posed by the EU cooperation with Azerbaijan authorities.

Speaking about the EU support to civil society in the EaP countries, **Carmen Falkenberg Ambrosio**, Head of sector, DG DEVCO, European Commission, noted that the EU includes civil society **at all stages of the policy cycle**, both policy design and implementation. At national level, support for civil society is provided in bilateral programmes. She hailed the role of CSF for diverse working groups and sub-groups and encouraged more active contribution to intergovernmental platforms. At the same time, she noted that the EU expected civil society actors to be more actively involved in national policy-making and to cooperate widely with economic and cultural operators in the region.

3. EU Developments, the Riga Summit, and Challenges of the Association Agreements, Eurasian Customs Union and Beyond – Country Updates

During this panel, **Sintija Bernava**, DONUM ANIMUS (Latvia), presented the priorities of the Latvian presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2015 that include: EU’s growth and competitiveness; use of digital potential and movement towards an information society; strengthening the role of EU globally and developing stability and welfare in the EU Neighbourhood regions (with special focus on the EaP and Central Asia). Key events during the Latvian presidency include the 4th EaP summit in Riga on 21-22 May 2015 as well the EaP Media Freedom Conference (May 2015) and 2nd Civil Society Conference (May 2015).

Representatives of the EaP provided their respective country updates:

Moldova (Lilia Carasciuc, Transparency International): visa requirements for Moldovan citizens holding a biometric passport abolished from May 2014; Association Agreement to be signed on 27 June. Moldova’s position in international rankings, including the Corruption Perception Index, has improved significantly. Russian propaganda, particularly in Transnistria, is pervasive. Public support for EU integration is strong. Members of National Platform regularly hold public debates about the advantages of the EU integration and the Association Agreement.

Ukraine (Volodymyr Kuprii, Creative Centre): representatives of civil society are actively involved in development of the Reanimation Reform Package - a joint initiative of civil society and policy makers in the context of Ukraine’s eurointegrationist aspirations, of which anti-corruption laws are an

important part. In the context of implementation of the AA, new dedicated EU-Ukraine civil society platform is to be set up, debates are underway about who should represent the Ukrainian civil society in the platform – while the EU insists on the social-economic representation, Ukrainian civil society has a different concept of the platform.

Georgia (Lasha Tugushi, European Initiative Liberal Academy): strong support for EU integration (80% in 2014 vs 76% in 2013). National Platform is actively engaging in the national policy making: contributed drafting of the European Communication Strategy and Action Plan 2015-2017 for the Ministry of European Integration; participated in elaboration of the working plan to the Association Agreement; monitors implementation of the EU-Georgia Action Plan on Visa Liberalisation. Challenges outlined: awareness-raising, especially among national minorities in the region, structural and policy dialogue (of 17 policy documents submitted to the government only several were accepted). Further steps: maintain wide profile of the national platform with a special focus on human rights and democratisation, signature of memorandum with the government.

Armenia (Mikayel Hovhannisyan, Eurasia Partnership Foundation): security vs freedom conflict, attempts to use the complementarity approach in foreign policy; date of the Customs Union signature postponed; debate on the necessity of revising the legal framework EU-Armenia relations ongoing, but with no substantial progress. Attempts by civil society to set up a pro-European alliance, but too early to assess. Challenges to tackle: Armenia currently low on EU agenda, lack of content-based discussions on EU-Armenian relations, no linkage in public perception between foreign policy and internal situation.

Azerbaijan (Gubad Ibadoglu, Public Initiative Center): more than 100 people imprisoned on politically motivated grounds (Amnesty International); environment for civil society organisations remains unfavourable – need to obtain special permission for donor funding from the ministry of justice, rental and meeting spaces can only be booked pending presidential administration permission.

4. Elections 2014: Free or Unfree?

During this panel, moderated by **Krzysztof Bobiński** (Unia a Polska, Poland), the participants were updated on the conduct of the presidential elections in Ukraine and recent local elections in Belarus and Georgia. While the assessment of the local electoral process by independent observers in Belarus remains unchanged (neither free, nor fair), the 25 May presidential elections in Ukraine were assessed as a resounding exercise in democracy by all election observations missions, despite the extraordinary circumstances in which the vote had to take place. Positive evaluations have also been awarded to the conduct of the local election in Georgia held in June 2014. At the same time, it was noted that the local elections in Georgia reflect the trend of local administrations to follow the interests of the ruling party.

5. Report from EaP Intergovernmental Platform 1 meeting

Lilia Carasciuc, Transparency International (Moldova), and **David Tumanyan**, Communities Finance Officers Association (Armenia), briefed the group on the EaP Intergovernmental Platform 1 meeting that took place on 11 June 2014. The discussion focused on the work priorities of Platform 1 for the next twelve months that include democracy and human rights, public administration reform, fight against corruption, and improved judiciary. The Forum's representatives welcomed the presence of the topics of corruption and self-governance on the agenda. At the same time, they contributed the following priorities on behalf of WG1: EaP-EU security, energy security (avoidance of procurement monopolies), and tackling the Russian propaganda. With regard to anti-corruption projects, the following priorities have been proposed: monitoring of EU funding; monitoring of conflict of interest; declaration and control of assets and incomes; monitoring of political parties funding.

6. WG1 projects funded by Strengthening capacities of the National Platforms of the EaP Civil Society Forum project

The WG1 coordinators presented the projects selected for funding under the “Strengthening capacities of the National Platforms of the EaP Civil Society Forum”. Out of 11 submissions, three proposals were selected reflecting the priorities of the Working Group. Low quality of some of the proposals has been noted.

“Comparative elections observation” (lead organisation - *European Initiative Liberal Academy Tbilisi, Georgia*): the project will provide a comparative analysis of 2013-2014 elections in selected EaP countries, including a comparative assessment of the extent of their freedom and fairness. The resulting publication will be used for CSF advocacy and presentation at the annual Forum’s meeting in Tbilisi.

“EU Budget Support to Eastern Partnership Countries: Civil Monitoring and Evaluation” (lead organisation – *Open Society Foundation NGO, Ukraine*): the project will provide civil society monitoring of evaluation of the EU general and sectoral budget support in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, and, where necessary, describe the state of play, amounts provided and policy impact achieved. It also seeks to inspire further civil society activities aimed at more transparent, efficient and accountable use of budget support by beneficiaries.

“Strengthening NGO Participation in the Execution Process of ECHR Judgments in South Caucasus” (lead organisation - *Legal Education Society, Azerbaijan*): the project will seek for ways to to avoid failures in execution of ECHR judgements in target countries and empower civil society to monitor the execution process.

7. Review of sub-groups, including formation of new ones

The afternoon session was dedicated to review of existing sub-groups and sub-groups meetings with the aim to facilitate the group’s input to the Forum’s new strategy for 2015-2017. A new sub-group on regional cooperation and confidence building was presented. While opinions divided whether to split the public administration sub-group into two separate units dealing with local governance and public administration reform or keep both together, unanimity prevailed over the fact that at the moment there is no need to split the group and that more attention should be dedicated to the theme of public administration reform versus local government reform. .

During break-out sessions, the sub-groups developed a set of detailed, concrete thematic work priorities and, in some cases, advocacy tools to be included in the Forum’s new strategy.

Human Rights and Judiciary Reform:

- rights of political prisoners;
- rights of human rights defenders;
- human rights in conflict zones;
- impunity (tortures, corruption, police and prosecutor’s office reform);
- execution of ECHR’s decisions;
- rights of prisoners (detention conditions);
- anti-discrimination (mechanism for implementation of the law or draft the law, hate speech);
- rights of migrants;
- health and rights (rights of patients, including those at psychiatric clinics);
- human rights defenders.

Anti-corruption/fight against corruption:

- transparency and accountability of public spending (including EU funding);
- integrity and accountability in public service (conflict of interest, declaration of incomes and assets, ethics);
- political accountability, political parties funding, including administrative resources.

Local government and public administration reform:

- decentralisation (fiscal, political and administrative);
- citizen participation in the affairs of local authorities (strengthening civil organisations/local authorities cooperation; territorial cooperation);
- participation in civil service reform: training and more evaluation; cooperation with the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) and the Congress of the Council of Europe;
- follow up in implementation of EU flagship initiatives;
- participation in consultations on the post 2015 UN agenda;
- participation on fiscal decentralisation index.

Visa facilitation and visa liberalisation:

- second stage of Visa Liberalisation Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine;
- visa dialogue or Armenia and Azerbaijan;
- visa facilitation and readmission agreement for Belarus.

Activities proposed: roundtables on Visa Code in Brussels, series of pro-visas free events in the EU Member States; series of seminars facilitating exchange of experience on Visa Liberalisation action Plan between Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Media freedom:

- withstand/combat Russian propaganda (use all regulatory mechanisms to defend customer from propaganda, set up a uniform mass media/TV channel for EaP countries broadcasting counterpropaganda);
- withstand/combat the contamination of the information space and propaganda;
- ensure transparency of mass media ownership and learning the progressive experience through research and monitoring.

Election monitoring:

- maintain interest in election monitoring until 2016.

Key events: election observation mission to Moldova (parliamentary elections in November 2014); election observation mission to Ukraine (early parliamentary elections).

Activities proposed: election observation, monitoring and reflection on the electoral process.
Advocacy work: reaction to human rights violations straight away (civil society in one country replying to events in other countries); support to rule of law in the EaP countries; dissemination of information about cases of repression to local media; work to bolster elections in disputed regions; promote youth exchanges and cross-border exchanges.

Regional cooperation and confidence building:

- reintegrate people from conflict zones/disputed territories (elaborate project allowing people from all areas of the EaP to be involved in the process, prepare for future possible participation in the Forum);
- propose the Steering Committee to have asymmetrical approach regarding inclusion of people from different conflict areas, elaborate modus for their participation in the CSF work;
- priority for civil society - stimulate confidence building.

8. Proposals for formats of future WG1 meetings, sub-group organisation, and Tbilisi Forum event

Due to time limitations, proposals for formats of future WG1 work and annual Forum's meeting in Tbilisi will be sought and shared online. A suggestion was put forward to invite civil society representatives from Crimea to attend the Forum's annual meeting in Tbilisi without the standard selection procedure.

*Minutes produced by the Secretariat of the Steering Committee
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