

## The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

### An important tool with ambivalent interim results

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*300 representatives of civil society gathered for the fourth Civil Society Forum at the end of November 2012. With authoritarian governments viewing it as unnecessary and owing to its own structural deficits, the Forum cannot be considered fully established yet. But marking it as a “failure” would be careless. It contributes essentially to political decision-making in the EU’s Eastern neighborhood countries, and thus is worthwhile for the EU to support as a long-term process.*

With the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the European Union seeks to support modernization and harmonization with neighbor states Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Until now, European Neighborhood Policy mostly relied on cooperation with governments. After years of criticism from experts and NGOs, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (CSF) was established in 2009.

Non-governmental organizations from the six EaP states and from interested EU member states meet annually at the CSF to exchange views and policy recommendations on national and EU policies. This year’s meeting took place in Stockholm on November 28-30, 2012. The Forum previously met in Brussels (2009), Berlin (2010), and Poznan (2011). The 2013 meeting is planned for the Moldovan capital Chişinău—the first time in an EaP country.

The creation of the Forum as a civil society exchange platform and a starting point for political contributions represents a cultural turn in EU external relations. This two-level approach—involving civil society in addition to governmental actors—is a vital improvement. Sustainable democratization in states and societies in

transition can only be successful if it is discerningly supported by active citizens.

### Political Corrective and Alternative Source of Information

Civil society actors can serve as a corrective to state politics in less democratic and authoritarian states in which the parliamentary opposition is unable to fulfill this role.

The CSF has organized national platforms in order to have more influence at the governmental level in the EaP states. This country-specific work is the Forum’s biggest asset since fundamental decisions are made at the level of the nation state. The Forum needs to position itself here if it wishes to advance its policy recommendations, monitor political processes, and accompany them critically and constructively.

The governments of some EaP countries such as Moldova and Georgia regularly consult with representatives from the national platforms. And for EU neighborhood commissioner Štefan Füle and his team, they are natural contacts and alternative sources of

information in addition to governments. The CSF has permanent participant status for all government consultations that take place within the multilateral dimension of the EaP. To some extent, the European Commission also functions as a sort-of patron in countries with democratic and constitutional deficits that enables civil society groups to formulate public criticism and gives them more freedom of action. For example, the Belarusian platform has used this freedom of action to develop into a pro-European umbrella organization.

### **An Alternative Political Instigator**

In addition to the country groups, the CSF is composed of five thematic groups: democracy and human rights; economic integration; the environment and energy; contact between people; and social dialogue—a new focus. Representatives from all EaP countries and the EU meet in multinational working groups to develop mutual courses of action, draw comparisons to other countries, and use contacts in the EU.

At this level, an analysis for financial decentralization emerged—a topic that had so far attracted too little interest in EaP states, which generally tend to be centrally structured. A European Integration Index was created to compare the degree of EU harmonization among individual EaP states and to help observe and evaluate the work of governments.

### **A Platform of Regional Cooperation**

The Forum is also a platform for exchange between societal groups from different EaP countries that have so far established very few transnational contacts. The extent to which interstate conflicts disrupt societies was shown at the 2011 CSF in Poznan, when all of the Azerbaijani participants left the room when an Arme-

nian proposal was submitted. Baku and Yerevan have fought for years over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, amongst other issues.

The promotion of regional cooperation between civil society groups of the EaP states is only partially developed, but has decisive importance for political and economic modernization. After all, democratization and conflict resolution are not only tasks for state systems: they also depend on the development of society-wide democratic cultures. As a civil society platform for exchange, mutual learning, and synergy effects, the Forum is crucial for sustainable development in the region. Future meetings should focus more strongly on these aspects and more actively support multinational cooperation.

### **Structural Deficits: Democratic, Accountable, and Transparent?**

In addition to numerous small but essential successes, the Civil Society Forum has had to struggle with a number of structural birth defects:

The CSF was established by the European Commission as a civil society initiative: a contradiction in itself. Both the European Commission and participating NGO actors had very vague conceptions about the Forum's goals and mechanisms when it was founded, and it took almost three years until the CSF had developed a functional basis. Even today, disagreement remains concerning how much the CSF should be professionalized.

The debate centers on public relations and lobbying, among others. A decision was made at the 2011 Forum to establish a secretariat by 2012. To a certain extent, this makes civil society action become a profession. However, many political actors see the Forum as a coalition of voluntary, unsalaried, and thus financially

independent participants. But they were unable to assert themselves on the establishment and mandate of a secretariat. How the secretariat will actually position itself in practice remains to be seen. But what should be crucial for all members is actively seeing through and guiding its work together while ensuring transparency.

Another structural challenge relates to the CSF's composition. Non-governmental organizations can apply to participate in the annual Forum and are then chosen by the sitting steering committee in cooperation with the European External Action Service, but the final selection criteria are not transparent. The hereby recruited NGOs make up the Forum's plenum and vote for the next year's steering committee. This process means that the steering committee chooses the members for this year's Forum, who in turn will vote for the steering committee for the coming year.

But this is not the only problematic aspect. Motions and draft resolutions are often submitted during the Forum right before voting, which means that members lack the time needed for well-informed decision-making. In addition, there is a lack of transparency regarding who is active in national platforms and how the concrete voting and action mechanisms take place. Ultimately, the Forum's function between the annual meetings is unclear, and there is a lack of information on which individual CSF members act based on which interests and when the label "Civil Society Forum" may be used.

These deficits in democratic legitimation and non-transparent methods mean that those involved compromise the Forum's qualitative characteristics and aspirations: credibility and integrity. Of course, this development phase is not a remarkable phenomenon for a movement in the process of institutionalizing. Here, the Forum needs more profound and constructive feedback from EU representatives and should rely on experienced moderators.

## Patience Is Needed

The interim results of the Forum are thus ambivalent: In addition to considerable successes, one can note major structural deficits.

But decisive is the Forum's potential for making a central contribution to the development and consolidation of democracy and the rule of law in the EaP countries. It is thus worthwhile for the EU, its member states, and particularly for Germany to take the Forum seriously and make use of it.

In the countries of the Eastern Partnership, democratic development has stagnated for a number of years, with autocracy even taking hold in some states. With the exceptions of Moldova and Georgia, negotiations on an Association Agreement with the EU have stalled. The extent to which the situation has become unstable and prone to conflict can be seen in explosive Armenia-Azerbaijani relations, the socially tense atmosphere during elections in Georgia, the electoral successes of new parties in Ukraine as an expression of societal dissatisfaction, and the EU's policy of isolation vis-à-vis Belarus since 2010.

It would be negligent to disregard the Eastern European countries today. Even if challenges in other regions such as North Africa appear more urgent at the moment, it is only a matter of time until conflicts in Eastern Europe have far-reaching, destabilizing effects—and this would be taking place in the EU's direct neighborhood.

With the instrument of the Civil Society Forum, the EU has fostered a mechanism to promote differentiated flows of information and incentives parallel to the governmental level. This two-level approach is well-suited to confront the complex processes of democratizing societies, to timely recognize critical situations, and to better assess government actions.

**But the two-level approach can only function under the following conditions:**

- **Coherence:** Government consultations and the acquisition of information through civil society must be clearly differentiated. For instance, the fact that the German Foreign Office was selected to host the 2010 CSF in Berlin gave a contradictory signal to civil society as well as governments in the EaP.
- **Sensitivity:** Civil society is as heterogeneous as the societies from which it arises. It shouldn't be misunderstood as a "cheap think tank" and

it cannot be expected to speak with one voice as a homogeneous institution would. It needs to be about supporting diversity, plurality, and a lively culture of debate and about developing a sensitivity for diverse actors and motives.

- **Reliability:** Societal transformation processes require time and institutionalization requires a leap of faith. The actors need to be able to rely on the fact that that which the EU initiates and promises will be abided by in the future. Therefore, the EU should responsibly promote the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and invest for the long-term—irrespective of fast moving daily politics.

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