



EU INTEGRATION & COMMON SECURITY: MAKING IT HAPPEN  
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## Activity of the Belarusian National Platform of EaP CSF in 2013-2014

The report of the Coordinating Committee of the Belarusian National Platform of the Civil  
Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership (2013-2014)

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## Purposes and tasks of the Coordination Committee's activity in 2013-2014

During its first meetings, the Coordination Committee (CC) defined a circle of its priority tasks for the year as follows:

A. Belarusian-European relations; the use of the tools of the European programs and the European policy in order to achieve our purposes:

- Further work to restructure the European Dialogue for Modernization (EDM); introduction of a stakeholder component;
- Expansion of BNP participants' awareness of the European processes and programs;
- Use of the EaP CSF infrastructure – to carry out 2-3 joint events on the level of the national platforms of the EaP countries;
- Organization of the following NP Conference during the period between the CS Forum and EaP summit.

B. Self-determination of the BNP and development of relations inside it:

- To solve tactical tasks; to understand and to more expressively designate the purpose and specificity of the BNP and the Coordination Committee;
- To work out a more understandable policy of how to join the work of the NP; to introduce new forms of interaction and communication between the CC and organizations-participants of the NP.

C. Processes that can be launched in Belarus:

- To think over and to present proposals in the format of "road maps" for "proto-national" programs, such as:

1. "Regional program". Tasks: "an attempt to overcome the chaos of regional development"; to introduce policy questions on the regional level. Except for this primary objective, the launch of the regional program should solve a number of other tasks which appear due to actual needs (e.g. the increase of the level of regional activists' functional competence in their work with European projects).

2. The program "Public Opinion Formation" or "Advancement of the European norms in Belarus".

- To focus the energy of this year on 2-3 EDM-themed existing initiatives.

Great attention in the work of the CC and the BNP has been paid to interaction questions within the framework of the Civil Society Forum and to the reformatting of the European Dialogue on Modernization. Unfortunately, the results of this work are quite inconsistent. On the one hand, it was possible to organize the BNP's competent participation in the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Forum in Chişinău, to receive corresponding feedback after the meeting and the comments on the project of a strategy of the Forum, and to provide participation of representatives of Belarusian civil society in the events which passed in parallel with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Summit of the Eastern Partnership in Vilnius (November 2013). On the other hand, all efforts aimed at reformatting the EDM in conformity with the principles of a multilateral and equal dialogue of interested parties have failed (see more below).

As a result of the work within a year, the CC has managed to order a number of questions of the BNP's internal functioning. In particular, the BNP web-site (<http://npbelarus.info>) has been developed and launched; the Provision on the use and moderation of the BNP's public mass mailing has been accepted; the Provision on the principles of information cooperation between the web-site of the Belarusian National Platform of the EaP CSF and information resources of organizations-participants of the BNP has been approved. Organizations-participants of the BNP have received an opportunity to carry out a number of actions under the aegis of the BNP dedicated to concrete questions of the agenda of the Eastern Partnership (2 series of events in 2013 and 2014).

At the same time, a considerable number of these plans have not been implemented due to various reasons. In particular, it was not possible to carry out plans aimed at forming and starting national programs (regional program; work with public opinion). We were not sufficiently successful in attracting new organizations to cooperation within the scope of the BNP; a considerable number of actions within

the frame of the national platform development project were more in the interests of the organizations and did not help to strengthen the connections and expert potential on the basis of the BNP.

## Actual structure of the BNP

Today the **number of constant participants** of the BNP is 69 organizations; thus, in comparison with the last year, there are 5 more organizations.

The structure of the **Coordination Committee** of the BNP, which worked in 2013-2014:

- Ulad Vialichka – chairperson, EuroBelarus International Consortium
- Andrei Yahorau – current national coordinator of EaP CSF, Center for European Transformation
- Sergei Matskevich, Assembly of NGO
- Piotr Kuznetsov, Homel Democratic Forum
- Oksana Shelest, Agency for Humanitarian Technologies
- Yaroslav Bekish, Green Alliance Network
- Aleksandr Volchanin, Chernobyl Union

Honorable member of the Coordinating Committee - Ales Bialiatki, Human Rights Center “Viasna”

## European Dialogue on Modernization

Within the last year, the CC of the BNP conducted active work discussing with interested parties the alternatives of the development of the European Dialogue on Modernization with Belarusian society as it is one of the important initiatives which in a combination with the Eastern Partnership can make essential impact on the development of Belarusian-European relations. The CC communicated through letters with the EU official representatives, offering its approach to the development of the EDM where an essential role is assigned to civil society as to one of interested parties. Unfortunately, the decisions accepted by the EU actually prove that it has chosen another way of the EDM development where it is transferred in an “expert-project” format instead of the format of “a round table of interested parties”. As a result, the EDM loses a potential of essentially attracting a wide range of public organizations and their target groups in this initiative. As certain compensation, a representative of the BNP was included in the Council of the project, which will have the name “REFORUM” now and be administered by the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies. The organizers promise to take into consideration civil society’s opinions through a number of sociological polls and the organization of sui generis sector forums, but they are not ready to see the BNP as an orderer of such work. The same position was also expressed by the EU delegation in Belarus, which supported this format.

## Activity within the pale of the EaP CSF project to develop national platforms

A part of the activity of the Belarusian National Platform has taken place within the bounds of the project aimed at developing national platforms in the countries of the Eastern Partnership, which was supported by the European Commission. The project includes two basic parts: regional activity, where several EaP countries are involved, and special activity separately for each country.

### *Regional activity*

In 2013, it was initiated to carry out a regional monitoring and evaluation of the performance of the road map of the Eastern Partnership to the Summit of the Eastern Partnership in Vilnius in November 2013. The monitoring was coordinated by the international research organization PASOS. From the Belarusian side, experts of the Center for European Transformation and the NGOs Assembly participated in the monitoring preparation.

The monitoring presents an evaluation of the performance of the road map in the context of Belarus and the Belarusian situation. The cooperation with the state, structures of the European Commission, and other civil society organizations is analyzed as for the influence on the working-out of the policy, the

development of an inner-sector and between-sector dialogue, the dialogue at the state level, etc. The implementation of the road map of the Eastern Partnership in 2012-2013 is analyzed on bilateral and multilateral levels. Following the results of the research, a monitoring document has been prepared and published.

Within the framework of a regional component, on 17-18 March 2014, there was a trip of representatives of the Belarusian National Platform to Brussels, where there were meetings at the office of European commissioner Š. Füle and in the secretariat of the Civil Society Forum. The agenda of these meetings included such questions as the general evaluation of the state of affairs in the Eastern Partnership and its prospects, the Ukrainian crisis and its influence on the region, the situation in the NP, programs of the European Union for Belarus, the place of civil society in them, and others.

In May 2014, a representative of the Belarusian NP was directed to the presidential election in Ukraine for the sake of an expert evaluation of a possible influence of the Ukrainian events on the situation in Belarus, in the region, and on the prospects of the Eastern Partnership with a special accent on the role of civil society.

### *Activity in Belarus*

#### **BNP web-site**

In October 2013, a special web site - <http://npbelarus.info/> - was launched; it is dedicated to the program "Eastern Partnership" and the Belarusian National Platform, in particular. There is topical news published regularly on this site, as well as news about considerable events connected with the region and with Belarus' civil society, as well as the EU policy with reference to the EaP countries. The site shows as much as possible the activity of the Belarusian National Platform; the BNP's statements and appeals are regularly published here, which allows us to spread this socially considerable information more widely.

#### **Awareness-raising materials**

Except its participation in the preparation of a large-scale monitoring of the EaP road map, the Belarusian National Platform prepared an awareness-raising brochure about the activity of the organizations-participants of the BNP for the Fifth Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership which passed on 4-5 October 2013. The brochure includes a report on the activity of the BNP for the last period and the future plans. The information on every organization-participant of the Fifth Forum from Belarus allowed us to present the Belarusian delegation and to promote an establishment of further partner communication as there were contacts in the brochure. The brochure was spread during the Forum among other participants from the countries of the region and the EU.

In order to promote the Eastern Partnership and the Belarusian National Platform, we made a planning calendar for 2014, which was spread free of charge among participants of the NP and other Belarusian NGOs.

#### **Conferences of the National Platform**

Conferences of the National Platform are the key communication format within the scope of the National Platform; they allow its organizations to gather and form a common agenda, to exchange experiences and opinions. On 16 November 2012, during the second conference of the NP, the "Concept of the development of the Belarusian National Platform of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership (2012-2014)" was accepted.

In 2013, two special conferences took place. The first one happened on June, 1<sup>st</sup>, and had an election character: a new Coordinating Committee and its chairperson were elected; it accepted several resolutions and finally solved technical questions such as the format of participation of online initiatives, some aspects of acceptance of new members, moderation of special electronic mass mailing, etc. In the conference called "Between the Eastern Partnership and the European Dialogue on Modernization", 91 representatives of civil society organizations and mass media took part.

The second conference of the Belarusian National Platform called the "Future of the Civil Society Forum in the focus of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Summit of the Eastern Partnership" took place on 4 November 2013 and was devoted to the summarizing of the passed Fifth meeting of the Forum in Chişinău and to the discussion of the future of the initiative itself, as well as the resources and possibilities of the Belarusian National Platform in the advancement of the European principles and values, in the development of a democratically-focused civil society in Belarus, and the strengthening of the role of Belarus in the region and international arena. 78 representatives of civil society organizations and mass media took part in the conference.

### **Expert and working meetings**

An important component of the project, which allows it to develop directly civil society organizations and their competence, is expert and working meetings. In 2013-2014, there was a number of round tables and expert meetings discussing thematic questions, as well as some organizational meetings of NP participants for the sake of the formation of a Belarusian joint position on the key questions on the eve of the events of the Civil Society Forum.

### **Working Group 1**

The problem of freedom of speech and statements, freedom of distribution of information, is very actual for today's Belarus. Therefore, on 3 May 2013, on the world day of freedom of press, with the help of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, there was an expert meeting themed "Prospects of reforming the media sphere. What can be done by the journalistic community?". At the meeting, there was an analysis of the legislation in the context of the media, outlining the basic problems and barriers faced by modern independent Belarusian mass media. One of successful measures of overcoming the existing problems is schools for young and professional journalists. One of the basic moments of this meeting was the presentation of the results of the regional joint project of several countries of the region within the limits of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership; a special detailed analysis of the situation with the mass media in the region was prepared and recommendations were developed.

Together with the Legal Transformation Center, the NGOs Assembly addressed to the Parliament with an offer of carrying out public hearings concerning the introduction of changes in several laws that had to do with the activity of political parties and other public associations. The offer was rejected - in reply to that, it was suggested to carry out public hearings on the platform of Working Group 1. Experts in the field of legal regulation of the activity of non-state and non-commercial organizations and representatives of non-state public organizations took part in the hearings which happened on 9 October 2013. During this event, the results of the analysis of the legislation were presented and discussed. Also, the discussion results together with proposals of how to reform the legislation were sent to the Parliament; it was planned to work out a map of reforming the legislation taking into account interests of public associations.

In November 2013, there was a regional meeting at the initiative of the Homiel Democratic Forum. The meeting was dedicated to the Eastern Partnership program popularization in the regions of Belarus, distribution of actual and correct information on the programs and position of the European Union concerning Belarus, and actualization of the European values in the context of the Belarusian situation.

On 16 April 2014, with the support of the NGOs Assembly, there was the round table "Conflictogenity of the language situation in Belarus in the new geopolitical conditions and the experience of the European Union". Well-known linguists and public figures discussed the international language law and the necessity of returning Belarusian NGOs to work over the global declaration of the linguistic rights; they also supported the initiative of addressing to the Constitutional Court with an appeal to review again the case of removal of some articles from the legislation on languages so as to eliminate exceptions, some collisions, and legal uncertainty in it.

### **Working Group 2**

In cooperation with the National Confederation of Entrepreneurship, on 25 September 2013, there was a round table devoted to the problematics of working resources for business and the role of business associations and NGOs in the solution of this problem. Numerous representatives of state structures, including the Ministry of Labor, as well as business organizations and NGOs, took part in it; all of them

presented their visions of the problem and suggested their ways of solving it. As a result, having used the materials of the discussions and presentations, a group of experts who participated in this event prepared an analytical material reviewing the conditions and problems of working resources in Belarus.

### **Working Group 3**

Within the frame of EaP CSF Working Group 3, on 21 June 2013, there was a round table concerning the implementation of the Aarhus Convention in Belarus. There were the best NGOs experts in this branch, a representative of the Aarhus Center in Belarus, and a representative of the UNDP in Belarus, which is directly engaged in the implementation of the project connected with the monitoring of the performance of the Convention. Also, it considered the question of the construction of the Belarusian atomic power station and its inconsistent evaluation by official experts, including in the context of the Aarhus Convention.

Being based on the results of the experts' discussion, offers on perfection of the activity of the public coordinating environmental council at the Ministry of Natural Resources and Protection of Environment were worked out and sent to corresponding power structures.

### **Working Group 4**

On 25 September 2013, the Belarusian National Youth Council "RADA" organized a round table on the implementation of the youth policy in Belarus. In cooperation with an expert-lawyer, they prepared a detailed analysis of the legislation in the context of the youth policy. The meeting was attended by a representative of the international organization "International Center for Not-for-Profit Law", who shared her experience and vision of how to reform the youth policy in Belarus. The meeting became a starting point of the further work of youth non-state organizations in Belarus aimed at analyzing their environment and working out corresponding recommendations for its reforming.

In November - December 2013, there were 2 meetings of representatives of the organizations which deal with the problems of senior people and the pension legislation. On the basis of the analysis of the legal condition on this point in Belarus and in the neighboring countries, the basic proposals of introducing changes in the corresponding legislative acts in Belarus were outlined.

In March 2014, there was an event dedicated to the discussion of the legal status of the Belarusian language. The meeting was attended by famous experts in the language question; the participants were acquainted with a detailed analysis of the development of the condition of the Belarusian language in the political and cultural contexts. A lawyer of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee presented a concept of advancement of the Belarusian language - a project of a document to be addressed to the Constitutional Court. Also, a decision to create a language commission with the assistance of leading public organizations was accepted.

### **Working Group 5**

On 18 April 2013, at the initiative of the National Confederation of Entrepreneurship, there was a round table themed "Development of social partnership. Legal borders and constraining restrictions". At the meeting, there were representatives of business associations, trade unions, and non-state organizations, as well as representatives of state structures, who deal with the questions of the working legislation. For the first time, such a wide structure discussed problems which arise in cooperation of business, the state, and non-state structures and the obstacles which appear on the way of the development of the social partnership concept in Belarus. Following the results of the meeting, a group of experts prepared a detailed analysis of the implementation of social partnership and developed a number of recommendations of how to improve this process.

## **Other initiatives and actions within the bounds of the BNP for the last year**

### *Statements, appeals, and positions of the BNP*

For the accounting period, the CC and the BNP have accepted a number of documents which represent the BNP's position concerning a wide circle of questions, both as for the situation in the country and in the international context, such as:

- Letter of the CC to the head of the EU Delegation to Belarus M. Mora and the head of a department of the European External Action Service G. Wigand with criticism of the BISS' proposals concerning the third phase of the European Dialogue on Modernization (23.09.2013)
- Appeal of the BNP to the participants of the Forum in Chişinău, national platforms, and the Steering Committee of the Forum: "What to be expected from the 5<sup>th</sup> Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership?" (30.09.2013)
- Resolution of the conference of the BNP d/d 4 November 2013
- Feedback to the address of the EaP CSF Coordinating Committee "Basic results of the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership: a view from Belarus" (05.11.2013)
- Comments of the BNP to the project of the EaP CSF Strategy for 2014-2016 (05.11.2013)
- Appeal of the BNP to the Ukrainian National Platform "In support of Ukrainian civil society organizations which favor Ukraine's further European integration" (26.11.2013)
- Appeal of the of CC of the BNP to the EU, Northern Council, and donors that finance the EHU "About the conflict situation at European Humanities University" (17.02.2014)
- Appeal of the BNP to the UN, OSCE, and EU "About the international monitoring of the situation in Ukraine" (21.02.2014)
- Appeal of the BNP "About solidarity with the people of Ukraine" (24.02.2014)
- Appeal of the BNP to the heads of the USA, EU countries, Russia, and Belarus "About Russia's military intervention to the independent Ukraine" (03.03.2014)
- Appeal of the BNP "About support of the UN Resolution on Ukraine's territorial integrity" (09.04.2013)
- Statement of the BNP in connection with the death of people in Odessa and eastern Ukraine (06.05.2014)
- Statement of the BNP concerning the fact that Belarus has signed the treaty to create the Eurasian Economic Union (02.06.2014)
- Resolution of the BNP Conference "Belarus in the conditions of the regional crisis and stagnation of the Eastern Partnership" 21 June 2014

It is necessary to underline that some of the BNP's statements were really actively taken into account (EDM, EHU, EaP CSF Steering Committee, a number of documents on Ukraine); although, not all of them really caused a corresponding reaction and expected consequences. Today, the acceptance of general documents of the BNP has already become a rather standard procedure and good practice within the context of the BNP, which allows us to articulate rather operatively and regularly the position of civil society concerning pressing questions. At the same time, this good practice needs a further perfection of the process, in particular - the CC should have a possibility to initiate statements and appeals on behalf of the BNP without additionally gathering signatures, in particular in obvious situations that demand fast reaction.

### *BNP's reaction to the events in Ukraine*

As it is seen from the mentioned above list of the documents accepted by the BNP, the Belarusian National Platform actively reacted to the events in our southern neighbor. Among the accepted 14 statements, 6 documents are devoted to the Ukrainian events. Besides, a number of Belarusian volunteers, activists, and legal experts regularly visited Ukraine during several months with different missions. Still, it is necessary to notice that these trips were not connected with the BNP's activity and were initiated by activists themselves.

### **Round table on Ukraine**

On March, 14<sup>th</sup>, in Minsk, with the support of the International Consortium "EuroBelarus" and the CC of the BNP, there was the round table "Ukraine today: what we can and should do in this situation?". The main speaker was Tatiana Novikova (BANC); there also were a number of Belarusian volunteers, legal experts, and observers of EuroMaidan.

During the discussion, they mentioned the questions of the analysis of the Ukrainian Maidan as a new phenomenon for society, its role in the political situation, Belarusian participation in the Ukrainian events, the basic lessons which can be learnt by Belarusian civil society from the Ukrainian events, a possible account of the new situation within the limits of the Eastern Partnership initiative, etc. Participants of the round table accepted recommendations on concrete steps of support of Ukrainian colleagues and lessons for Belarus' civil society.

### **BNP special rapporteur on Ukraine**

Following the results of the round table, Tatiana Novikova was chosen as a BNP special rapporteur on Ukraine; with the organizational support of the NGOs Assembly, the International Consortium "EuroBelarus", and the CC, she took part in supervision over the presidential election in Kyiv on 25 May 2014. The results of her mission were described in a report on this trip, as well as in a number of publications on the web-sites of the BNP, "EuroBelarus", etc.

Participants of the Ukrainian National Platform repeatedly expressed their gratitude to the BNP for its active reaction to the events in their country and the solidarity with the civil society and people of Ukraine in their aspiration to independent self-determination in the direction to European integration.

### *Working meeting with representatives of the Armenian NP*

Unfortunately, it was impossible to organize a full-fledged meeting with representatives of other national platforms beyond the framework of the general meeting of the Forum due to technical and financial reasons. At the same time, at the initiative and with the support of the International Consortium "EuroBelarus", on 17-18 April 2014, in Yerevan, there was a working meeting of a small group (A. Yahorau, U. Matskevich, A. Tonkacheva, U. Vialichka) with representatives of the Armenian National Platform. The purpose of this meeting was to build relations, to present the basic tendencies in the development of the situation in our countries and national platforms, to evaluate together the state of affairs in the Eastern Partnership and the consequences of the Ukrainian events for the EaP region, and to find the common points for solidary actions in the EaP format or similar formats.

Armenian and Belarusian participants came to a conclusion about the necessity of regular coordination and exchange of thoughts between themselves. There is an obvious need in the synchronization of solidary actions and political positions of the Armenian and Belarusian NPs which face similar challenges (Customs Union, refusal of political management to approach to the European standards, etc.). It makes sense to initiate cooperation at the intellectual level by organizing one or several meetings of country experts, analysts, philosophers, political scientists who work with the problematics of political development. Also, it is expedient to initiate a program of mutual visits of civil society groups to each other so as to establish closer relations and cooperation.

## **Conclusions, recommendations, proposals: prospects and challenges for the further activity of the BNP**

The development of the Belarusian National Platform faces a number of external and internal challenges. The basic ones have three dimensions: the general challenges of the Eastern Partnership, the internal situation in Belarus, and the condition of the activity of the Belarusian National Platform itself:

### **Eastern Partnership**

Today, the Eastern Partnership initiative is in the obvious crisis. A positive impulse of transformations of the EaP countries according to the European model, which was provided by the Eastern Partnership, has faced several contradictions.

A) Russia's actions and its military aggression in the region have increased the price of cooperation of our countries with the EU and provoked a long political crisis in Ukraine, as well as the change of



Armenia's geopolitical course. Today, the Eastern Partnership has no corresponding tools of counteraction to the Russian policy in the region.

B) The EaP's orientation basically on cooperation with the states and their adaptation of the norms of the European legislation while ignoring the internal political context of the partner countries has demonstrated its obvious doltishness. The state elites are not interested in any transformations and easily feign the process of reforms without launching real changes. All spadework on reforms, as it is proved by the situations in Ukraine and Armenia, can be turned upside down rather quickly.

C) While declaring the highest importance of making civil society part of the transformation process, the EU rather bureaucratizes and formalizes civil society's participation in the EaP initiative. Focusing its attention on state institutions, the EU creates certain barriers to society's wider contribution to the political process. The paradoxicality of this approach is that this is the way the EU pushes away the most Europeanized part of society of the partner countries. Meanwhile, as proved by the situation in Ukraine, it is society and civil society that is the most important actors of European transformation.

D) The multilateral dimension of the EaP policy can face the challenge of marginalization of the countries-outsiders in the processes of rapprochement with the EU (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus) that undermines the integrity of this regional initiative.

## Internal situation in Belarus

The adverse conditions for civil society's development in the country actually push it out on the periphery of political life. To have a possibility to influence any decisions considerable for the country, civil society must first of all change the conditions of its existence. The most important question is political transformations and liberalization of the political regime, which requires a more active political role of civil society. At the same time, Belarus' civil society is obviously not ready to take such a mission upon itself.

Among dangerous tendencies of the last period, attention must be paid to the essential decrease of supporters of the pro-European development of Belarus and the growth of the pro-Russian moods in Belarusian society (in conformity with NOVAK's last sociological data), as well as the information war around Ukraine that is affecting negatively Belarusian society, too.

Soon, there will be the so-called "electoral phase" – the presidential "election" of 2015. Taking into account the absolute absence of conditions to carry out real elections, it would be important for the BNP to determine and to occupy an exact position with a corresponding behavior, statements and actions concerning its attitude to the 2015 campaign.

## Priorities

In connection with these challenges, the Belarusian National Platform should:

1. become in the nearest future a point of attraction and cooperation of pro-European groups within the pale of civil society, offering citizens a visible alternative of Belarus' development in the European vector.
2. initiate the process of reconsideration of the Eastern Partnership together with partners from the civil societies of the EaP countries; provide coordination and joint advancement of the general vision in the dialogue with the EU and other interested parties.
3. establish a closer format of cooperation with the national platforms of the EaP countries.
4. activate its efforts to join the process of European-Belarusian interaction (through, as least, monitoring of large-scale projects and cooperation programs).
5. return to the bases of the concept of the BNP's development accepted on 16 November 2012, providing its actions with bigger dynamism and efficiency; reconsider the concept in conformity with the actual tasks for 2015-2017.
6. taking into account the existing external and internal challenges, provide substantial cooperation of participants of the BNP within the framework of the most priority national programs in order to support the pro-European vector of development.