

Belarusian National Platform of the EaP Civil Society Forum: moving forward in contradictive process

Ulad Vialichka, Chairperson of International Consortium “EuroBelarus”,
National coordinator of the Forum for Belarus

Eastern Partnership as a strategic program of the European Union has been developing for the past two and a half years. The second EaP Summit in Warsaw in September 2011 might become important culmination of EaP development but it didn't happen there. Among other things, Belarus, being very specific EaP participant, demonstrated its unwillingness to improve its relations with the EU and regulate the unacceptable socio-political situation that has emerged in the country after the events of December 2010. Political 'Indian Summer' did not happen in Warsaw late September. The current external and internal situation once again shows how much work still remains undone, not only in the official Belarusian-European relations, but also at the level of internal Belarusian reality. Not the last role in carrying out this work belongs to the Civil Society Forum and its Belarusian National Platform.

Country context

Despite the existence of "Belarusian issue", the Eastern Partnership in general has reached a new level of development as a long-term strategic program of the European Union. Its institutional building process was completed, through having formed, more or less, all the necessary bilateral and multilateral cooperation structures (multilateral governmental thematic platforms, expert panels, *EURONEST*, Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities, Civil Society Forum). Political negotiations with many of the EU neighboring countries have quite significantly advanced and should result in the coming months in signing of important free trade agreements and further gradual liberalization of visa regime.

Being very conditional and low-cooperative at the level of official relations with the EU, Belarus still regularly demonstrates its potential and interest in implementation of the objectives of the Eastern Partnership at the level of Civil Society Forum. This is also Belarus!

Behind the civil society organizations' position stand the aspirations and expectations of ordinary citizens of our country. According to the national survey results, provided by prof. Andrey Vardomatski and held in September 2011 by the Laboratory of Axiometrical Research "NOVAK", more than one third (34.8%) of Belarusian citizens at that moment knew about the Eastern Partnership, which was a very high exponent for our non-political society. In addition, the 71.6% of respondents related positively (or quite positively) to the objectives of the program. These figures clearly demonstrate Belarusian society's interest towards further Europeanization and improvement of relations with our main western neighbor.

I think that it will be no exaggeration saying that in the course of two years of its existence, thanks to the efforts of many organizations, experts and leaders from the public sector, the National Platform has already become a successful arena for coordination of positions of various organizations and interest groups. This happened despite the steady worsening conditions for activity of civil society organizations and almost complete absence of public policy environment in the country. By now level of organization and productivity of the National Platform (though, being still very far from the ideal) is one of the highest among all the partner countries. Our position papers, assessments and expert opinions as for the issues of the Eastern Partnership and the European Neighborhood Policy are seriously considered by all the main structures of the European Union and by European think tanks. But at the same time, it is still extremely not enough...

Socio-political situation in Belarus has considerably deteriorated, in comparison with the launching moment of the Eastern Partnership initiative (this, of course, is not due to our country's participation in the program, but to other factors' impact, which are mostly related to internal Belarusian specifics). State authorities have been continuously ignoring the efforts, proposals and appeals of the civil society, as well as those regarding the civil society itself, since December 2010. The repressive mechanisms are regularly used; their actual symbol has become the arrest of our colleague, Ales Byalyatski, head of the Human Rights Centre "Viasna". A chain of recently adopted laws regarding criminal responsibility for organizing non-approved public events and using non-registered external funding for CSO activities is purposefully leading to crucial restriction of rights and freedoms of Belarusian citizens. In such circumstances, it is impossible to effectively participate in the Eastern Partnership initiative neither at the state, nor at the civil society level. It is obvious that without addressing system problems in very Belarus it's impossible to dream of getting any meaningful "dividends" from this important European program.

Priorities for further development

All abovementioned challenges pose the Belarusian National Platform of the EaP Civil Society Forum towards the necessity of rethinking its role and place in the country and within the program itself, and force to find answers to the issue of format of the National Platform's further existence and development.

During the recent year of CSF activity Belarusian National Platform has held three big conferences (April 11-12, July 5, and October 29, 2011), adopted 5 resolutions, developed a number of statements and joint addresses. Belarusian participants of the platform have taken part in various international theme-based events including EaP conference in Warsaw in September 2011 and also presented number of policy papers and opinions regarding state of affairs in Belarus and possibilities to move forward relations between Belarus and the EU. At the same time intensity of activities within CSF working groups at national level significantly decreased despite the tries to implement the road map idea in the particular working formats.

Given the existing challenges and obstacles to achieving the objectives of the Eastern Partnership, there is a clear need to expand the agenda of the National Platform. That is, **to include in the list of urgent tasks the issues that go beyond the objectives of the Eastern Partnership, but on solution of which directly depend future of the country, its civil society organizations and success of the further processes of transformation.** Of course, such a solution would imply, in a certain sense, a new vision and a new role of the National Platform in the ground Belarusian processes. Therefore, this decision can

only be taken on the basis of extensive discussion and only by the supreme authority of the National Platform – the General Assembly.

Given the proven availability of alternative visions and approaches to the building of the National Platform, of fundamental importance is seen saving opportunities for the deployment of platform-based variety of initiatives, campaigns, coalitions and programs which may contain a component of alternativity towards each other. This would greatly enrich the very Platform and will provide non-exclusion of its activities of various actors who have different visions but equally share common values, principles and objectives of the National Platform. Thus, in my opinion, **the activities in the framework of the National Platform should be based not only on the mechanisms of agreement and consensus, but also on the mechanisms of coordination and synchronization of members' of the Platform activities, while maintaining its character of the common site and the arena of intercommunication.** Exactly such approach would be a vivid demonstration of the fundamental democratic approach and inclusiveness of the National Platform, approval of its commitment to the priorities and norms of the Eastern Partnership.

Despite the fundamental impossibility of launching the processes of social and political dialogue in our country at the moment due to closed position of the Belarusian state, **the National Platform must nevertheless consider this possibility as a perspective and realistic one, to prepare to it purposely from today already, to develop appropriate relationships with other civil society organizations, as well as with dialogue partners** (political parties, trade unions, religious organizations, cultural and intellectual groups, etc.). Such an approach towards dialogue will provide an appropriate place, role and importance of the civil society in these processes as soon as their implementation will become possible.

Proceeding of self-organization

Despite inappropriate conditions of existence and activity of the civil society in the country, as well as a certain stagnation of the development processes at the national level of the Eastern Partnership, the EaP CSF National Platform continues further self-organization and institutionalization.

At the last Conference of the Belarusian National Platform "Civil society of Belarus: on the eve of the third annual meeting of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum" held on October 29 in Minsk **adoption of the common Memorandum of the National Platform has taken place. The Memorandum describes basic goals, values and principles of self-organization on the basis of the platform.** It is stated there that Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum for the development of cooperation, mutual support, solidarity and information exchange among the civil society organisations. Platform objective is to consolidate the institutional possibilities on behalf of the civil society organisations to influence the democratisation processes in the country, the Belarusian-European cooperation and the reform agenda related to the approximation to the European standards in all the spheres of the society life.

In fact, after two years of informal and situational self-government, it's time now to launch more regular membership within the Platform and to authorize organizations that share the principles and objectives of joint activities, with the corresponding rights as for decision-making and delegating responsibility mechanisms. It will not make the Platform an organization (it is not necessary) but increase its structural properties, purposefulness and responsibility of performing the activities in the format of the National

Platform. At the Conference the text of the Memorandum was amended and finally adopted almost unanimously. The next step will be to organize the process of adopting this Memorandum by wide specter of Belarusian Civil Society Organizations.

Another necessary step towards self-organization is **establishment of the Steering Committee of the National Platform, which, in accordance with its prototype at overarching level, could perform service, coordinating and representative functions in situations that do not require a mandatory reaction of each organization-member of the platform.** It is not necessary for the NP Steering Committee to be built exactly in accordance with the structure of the Forum. It must take into account the overall program framework, but first and foremost meet the needs at our country and its civil society level. At modern stage of the National Platform existence, when membership hasn't been formed yet, and the development priorities and decision-making mechanisms have not been agreed on – the last Conference of the National Platform elected the Interim Coordination Committee which main task is to ensure the further development of the platform and provide internal coordination at new level of organization.

There is also strong necessity to **renew the work of ad-hoc analytical group on the basis of the National Platform.** This group's work was interrupted due to certain contradictions on issues of the further development vectors, but without this group the platform will lose the orientation and the dynamics of the activity, while previously it was characteristic of it with the active participation in the coordination processes of representatives of expert and analytical sphere of Belarusian civil society. Partly, this group performs also the functions of preliminary approval of fundamental and conceptual policy proposals and alternatives, which is very important for more effective joint decision making.

Some aspects of the activity

Of course, modern challenges and internal self-organization should be directly linked with concrete activities and ideas for implementation by the efforts of the platform participants. What can be done within the National platform activity on the basis of such institutionalization?

- **Renewing the pro-active life of four thematic working groups and filling them with real and productive content and work.** This is the basic level of the Platform activity, without which no aspirations towards the subjectivity of civil society in its relations with the government and international structures will be justified and full-fledged.
- As noted above, for further success there is need for **self-organization and initiative from civil society organizations as to create a variety of campaigns and coalitions on the basis of the National Platform within the goals and objectives, specified in the Memorandum.** Working groups established within the Civil Society Forum might not reflect all the challenges and capacity of civil society organizations at national level. Having freedom of maneuver in initiating new and fast formats of action will enrich the platform and respect diversity of actors united on its basis.
- An important task and innovation in the issue of the further expansion of the National Platform should become **active information and regional policy, gradual joining activity on the platform basis of more and more civil society actors who are still not involved in the processes of self-organization and development of public policy sphere.** The ideas and goals of Eastern

Partnership should be supported by wide range of actors and ordinary citizen not only in words but also by joint events, local initiatives and generated projects.

I also hope very much that Belarusian civil society organizations will explore the road map format presented by them at the last forum in Berlin and demonstrate active position at the Forum meeting in Poznan in November 2011. The result of it could be initiating several regionally settled “flagship” projects at civil society level. Poznan can become very good springboard for such ideas in cooperation with organizations from the partner and EU countries.

For more information, please, visit www.eurobelarus.info