



Intervention on the state of civil society in the Eastern Partnership countries to the Euronest Committee on Social Affairs, Education, Culture and Civil Society at the European Parliament on March 19, 2013 by Krzysztof Bobinski, Civil Society Forum Steering Committee co-chair

Thank you very much for this opportunity to share some thoughts on the development of civil society in the eastern partnership countries.

First a word on the Civil Society Forum which I represent. We are a loose alliance of over six hundred non-governmental organizations from the six countries. There is a Steering Committee which I co-chair with Boris Navasardian from the Yerevan Press Club in Armenia. Since the beginning of this year we have a secretariat in Brussels which is able to operate thanks to moral and financial support from the European Commission and especially Commissioner Fule, and the European External Action Service (EEAS). We have a website at www.eap-csf.eu. We meet once a year – last year in Stockholm and this autumn in Chisinau. We attend meetings between member states and the Commission and the EEAS which is a very valuable and much appreciated channel of communication.

Please let me congratulate the Committee for last year's report on the strengthening of civil society in the EaP authored by Artak Zakaryan and Iliana Iotova which was adopted in Baku almost a year ago. The report covered a lot of very important ground. I don't think we could have done better ourselves in the Civil Society Forum.

The challenge, however, is to implement the report or at least have it supported by both sides of Euronest especially the Eastern Partnership parliamentary side .

As you might imagine, given the differing political situation in the various partner countries, the picture of the conditions under which civil society in the EaP currently operates is not uniform.

Much depends on the willingness of the individual countries to accept the aims of the Eastern Partnership and their appetite for reform. Where there is no appetite for reform there is a hostile and mistrustful approach to civil society. This is true of Belarus and is becoming very true of Azerbaijan.

The official attitude to civil society in Armenia is ambivalent. Given the current controversy over the validity of the presidential election on February 18 it is unclear how relations will develop but there have been signs that the authorities would like to bring independent civil society under control. In Moldova the dialogue between civil society and the government appears to be continuing amicably and the authorities are supporting the organisation of our annual Forum in October. The situation appears to be stable in Ukraine where our national platform is urging the EU to sign the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement. In Georgia the dialogue is in train helped by the fact that a number of Civil Society Forum activists including the former head of the National Platform are now working for the new government. Also Tevan Poghosyan, a former CSF steering committee member, was elected on the opposition Heritage list to parliament in Armenia last summer.

At the same time, I would add that the dialogue between our national platforms and EU delegations in the EaP capitals is proceeding very well.

Unfortunately the negotiations on the Association Agreements which include DCFTAs between the European Commission and Armenia, Moldova and Georgia which are being conducted under conditions of some secrecy and with scant consultation with civil society. Although in Ukraine employers' associations and representatives of sectoral groups such as agriculture, transport and metallurgy were consulted during the talks and in Moldova some consultations are expected at the end of this month. The blame for the inadequate consultation with NGOs should be shared equally between the Commission and the EaP governments. This is a pity as the negotiations on the Association Agreements are a historic process with very big economic and political implications for the future of the EaP countries.

Other issues raised in the committee report include media freedom and the fight for gender equality as well as the protection of women against violence. Gender questions are low on the agenda of both EaP governments and Civil Society. Generally the traditional media have to contend with the authorities who want to control media content and rich private owners who use the media to further their own business interests and support the politicians in exchange for favours. Only in Georgia does our national platform report a generally satisfactory level of



media freedom while in the other countries there is much room for improvement.

Happily social media are able to fill the gaps which pressure from officials and the oligarchs have created. It should be a priority for us all to preserve and defend the democratic space which social media have created in countries like Azerbaijan and elsewhere.

Azerbaijan faces a presidential election next October and its authorities appear to have decided to severely limit independent civil society activities before the voting begins. The president recently signed changes to NGO legislation which will make it more difficult to fund civil society groups and easier to close down NGOs. There also appears to be no respect for the right of assembly as successive, small, demonstrations in Baku are broken up by police. Journalists who report on these demonstrations are themselves accused of inciting them and a number of press people are currently detained. The head of the presidential administration recently accused foreign donors of 'unlawfully' financing Azeri NGOs while there are reports confirmed by the OSCE in Vienna that Azerbaijan is exploring the possibility of changing the OSCE mandate. It is as yet unclear what this would entail. However, it appears that Baku would like to see less OSCE involvement in overseeing democratic processes. But will they go as far as to keep the ODIHR monitoring mission away from the country during the election? Nevertheless President Ilham Aliyev has said that the EU 'has no right to interfere in Azerbaijan's internal affairs' and he surely thinks the same about the OSCE.

It is now imperative that democracy in Azerbaijan should be defended. I urge Euronest as well as the European Parliament as a whole make its position clear on this drive by the authorities in Baku to go back on their commitments to the Eastern Partnership programme as well as to the OSCE and the Council of Europe of which Azerbaijan is a member.

Thank you for your attention.