EASTERN PARTNERSHIP
Civil Society Forum

On June 6, 2012 the meeting of the Working Group 1: Democracy, Human Rights, Good Governance and Stability of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (CSF) took place in Brussels with more than 60 representatives attending from of all six EaP countries, as well as from some EU member states.

Konstantinos Vardakis welcomed the participants on behalf of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and spoke of the most recent assessment of the Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Programme. Monica Bucurenciu from the European Comission's Development and Cooperation DG (DEVCO) updated the audience on the Civil Society Facility instrument. 191 concept notes were received in January, she said: 37 of them were pre-selected for the next round, 17 of which will be supported for projects in countries of the Eastern neighbourhood.

The coordinators of WG1 told the participants about the activities of working group, and discussed with fund-raising possibilities and accepted/declined project proposals.

National coordinators then reported about the activities of the National Platforms in the six EaP countries:

Armenia
The Armenian National Platform has finalised a set of principles for the establishment of the NP and participation of SCOs in it. Meetings of working groups are taking place on a regular basis both in Yerevan and in the regions. The next event to be organised – a presentation of the results of the Index of European Integration (second round).
Many civil society groups participated in election-related activities this year.

Azerbaijan
A democracy promotion campaign was initiated in Azerbaijan in preparation for the Eurovision song contest. There have been local and international calls to release imprisoned journalists and political activists, whose number is constantly increasing. Recently in (a speech on the 31 May speech) the Azeri government blamed international human rights organisations, and the EU for interfering in Azerbaijan's internal affairs.

Belarus
According to the coordinator, the Belarus NP, is currently developing in a broader direction than the thematic platforms of the EaP. The platform is now in the process of institutionalization, and a coordination group and regional sub-divisions are being formed. Shortly, a permanent steering committee will be formed. The national coordinator for Belarus added that civil society in Belarus is being engaged in European dialogue on modernization for Belarus, which is a unique initiative designed for this country specifically with the main focus on modernisation of the Belarusian economy.
The strategy, goals and aims of the national platform in Belarus are still to be decided upon, because there is no single voice of the NP in Belarus.

Georgia
Georgian national platform contains 109 organisations, with growing interest in participation being expressed by other NGOs.. The platform aims to increase its impact on policy-making. Georgian representatives underlined the limited practice of consulting services and peer learning between 6 EaP countries and called for a joint strategy for all National Platforms of EaP to share more practices and strategies. "There is a good will from the EU to increase the

role of NP's in decision making", said Georgian representative, "however, for that NPs need to be involved in the processes of the EU decision-making". Overall, there are a lot of challenges that are similar in all EaP countries, thereof we should be encouraged to have more joint projects.

The agenda of the Georgian NP at the moment is closely linked to the upcoming elections, and a campaign entitled "This affects you too" has been launched. This campaign has already proved successful in persuading the government to start consulting with the CSOs.

Moldova

Activism of CSOs in the country is growing. However, the Moldovan National coordinator believes that the National platform could have developed better. There are important ongoing reform processes such as adoption of the law on non-discrimination (which will enter into force on 1 January 2013), the creation of a centre to fight corruption and negotiations on visa liberalisation.

The Moldovan representative also believed that NPs should developi further, and Moldova, seen as a frontrunner of the EaP initiative, is willing to prove assistance to colleagues from other countries.

Ukraine

The Ukrainian NP organized a Civic Forum alongside the EU-Ukraine summit 2012 with Herman van Rompuy and Jose Manuel Barrosso attending.

Today, the Ukrainian NP is concentrating its efforts on trans-border cooperation, administrative reforms, media, issues of decentralization which are the most interesting topics for the NP at the moment.

In the second part of the meeting the participants worked in six thematic sub-groups to develop the recommendations for the seventh meeting of the EaP Platform 1 on the following day, June 7th. Below are the **recommendations** as **prepared by the sub-groups**:

I. *Anti-corruption subgroup*

1. While national governments and European institutions discuss fight against corruption in EaP region, **there is a tendency to overlook the problem of political corruption**, particularly the issue of financing of political parties, including **public financing**, financing election campaigns and bribery during elections. We suggest that **this issue has to be prioritized in anti-corruption reforms agendas** in our region both by national governments and international organisations. Without cutting links between politicians and oligarchs (or, at least, weakening them), it is impossible to create functional democratic political system. Fight against political corruption is a key direction in this regard.
2. Problem of **corruption in energy sector** is another priority for anti-corruption policy we suggest to focus on. Corruption in this sector causes losses not only to public finance and public integrity, but also to the energy security of the countries of the region. There is a need to develop capacities of the CSOs to monitor corruption in energy sector as well as to pursue coherent policies for more transparent energy sector in the region. Focus of international organisations on this issue is also needed.

3. Cases, where **EU funds may be misused and contribute to corruption** in EaP region should be closer monitored and prevented. In this regard the subgroups also wants to draw attention of the EaP national governments and international institutions to the **need for sound monitoring system in order to prevent misuse of public funds** during the preparation for events like UEFA EURO 2012. For example, in Ukraine all procurements for the preparation of the UEFA EURO 2012 where made disregarding the public procurement law.
4. Anti-corruption institutions with controlling and monitoring functions should be more open to the participation of CSOs and parliamentary opposition. They should have secured sources of funding and representative membership. When discussing parliamentarian bodies and committees, they need to be chaired by representatives of opposition parties and have a proportional representation.

II. *Subgroup on Local Government and Public Administration Reform*

Creating real local self government is not possible without decentralisation – fiscal decentralisation is one of the most important aspects in such decentralisation.

Issues that could be included in the initiative:

- How to develop possibilities for local authorities to access the capital markets
- How to strengthen competences to local authorities with consequent budget allocation
- Identify possibilities for local taxes
- Identify the possibility of services to be sold and technically provided by local authorities
- Implement possible pilot initiatives consolidating fiscal decentralisation and capacities of local authorities to implement it.
- Study how to improve the transfer system from the state budget to local budgets.
- How to include citizens into the decision making process and implementation of fiscal decentralisation.

III. *Visa Facilitation Sub-group*

1. Position on the Schengen visa issuance, visa facilitation and liberalization processes.
2. Strict visa regimes remain the visible and sensitive obstacle for regular people-to-people contacts in the entire Europe.
3. CSF Visa subgroup welcomes continuing efforts by the EU and EaP countries with regards the visa facilitations and visa liberalization processes. We encourage progress in the Visa dialogue with Ukraine and Moldova and support their progress towards the 2nd phase of Visa Liberalisation Action Plans as soon as relevant benchmarks are met. No additional political requirements should be introduced. Georgia is to follow this path in the close future. Visa Facilitation Agreements with Armenia and Azerbaijan should be signed opening the way towards next steps of visa liberalization process.
4. We encourage de-facto facilitated visa policy by the most of the EU Member State towards the citizens of Belarus. At the same time all the relevant visa liberalisation

option based on the uniformed criteria should be open for Belarus as soon as the government in Minsk is ready to start implementing them.

5. While the visa free travel is considered as a visible political perspective, fulfillment of existent rules and obligations remains in a focus of civil society actors. We stress on the need to ensure proper implementation of the EU Visa Code and with EaP countries especially those aimed at providing wider access to long validity multiple entry visas for bona fide travelers. Independent monitoring detects the variety of problems legitimate traveler often faces during visa application procedures, including ever-growing list of documents required and non-clear criteria of visa granting/refusal.
6. Harmonization of the visa requirements and procedures remains a key priority. While the EU Visa Code introduces certain level of harmonization, further steps are needed to ensure unification of the criteria and procedures.
7. The procedure of appeal should be available for all applicants refused providing for transparent and fair reconsideration of the visa application within the reasonable period of time.
8. We call the EU to provide more information on visas and legitimate travels to the EU by introducing a specific web-page accumulating all relevant information regarding the legal basis, general requirement and standard procedures of visa obtaining, question-answers page etc.
9. We are concerned by the enormously high visa refusal rate by the EU consulates in Georgia (15.3% in 2011, while average EU visa refusal rate in the world is 5%). This figure is obviously not relevant to the actual quality/integrity of visa applications submitted by Georgian citizens.

IV. *Judiciary sub-group*

1. Insure institutional independence of the Judiciary from the Executive branch, especially limiting the role of the executive branch in appointing and dismissing judges;
2. Insure independence of the individual judges within the judicial system by strengthening self-governments of the judges within the system;
3. Insure the system of the checks and balances within the judiciary in order to avoid the concentration of the excessive power under one institution and particularly in the hands of limited group of people.

V. *Human Rights Sub-group*

1. In the context of recent incidents in Azerbaijan as well as in Georgia and Armenia connected with the attacks on human rights activists, journalists and active members of civil society, we propose that the EU insist on fulfilling of international human rights obligations by governments of EaP countries and that EU (especially through its delegations and member state embassies in third countries) pay more attention to the implementation of EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.

2. We also suggest EU to consider introducing of appropriate sanctions in case of extensive and systematic human rights violations in these countries.

VI. *Media Sub-group*

1. Development of model laws (legal provisions) for EaP countries regulating specific areas of media operations, specifically, given their urgency, - on transparency of media ownership and on standards of election campaign coverage (MSWG is well positioned to draft such model laws in cooperation with other EaP structures (Euronest);
2. Introduction of Media Freedom Index for EaP countries. The existing similar indexes - by IREX, Reporters without Boarders, Freedom House indexes are not enough compliant to the specific situation in this region, while index is very important to assess the state with media and its dynamic, as well as for elaboration of strategy for action, MSWG has almost developed the methodology, and having selected concept is in the process of preparing full proposal to the Neighborhood Civil Society Facility.

At the closure of the meeting, WG1 adopted a number of statements:

Statement of the 1st Working Group of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on recent cases of violation of the ceasefire on the contact line of the Armenian and Azerbaijani armed forces. We should have this text

1. Statement on Azerbaijan
2. Statement on Georgia