

New role for the EU and the Baltic States in supporting civil society in Eastern Partnership countries and Central Asia

Policy brief

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Civil society in Eastern Partnership countries and Central Asia faces significant old and new challenges, and its potential to support reforms and democratisation, as well as to ensure peaceful development of society, is often stunted.

Of all EU Member States, the Baltic States are the best placed to lead the shaping of EU policies to support struggling civil society in Eastern Partnership countries and in Central Asia due to their knowledge of the local context and existing cooperation. The Baltic States should therefore make a more concerted and confident bid for developing and leading new EU initiatives and instruments for supporting civil society in these regions.

The Baltic States have been among the champions of EU neighbourhood policies in the Eastern Partnership countries and in Central Asia for many years. The prominence of the Baltic States in the organisation of Eastern Partnership summits, the central place accorded to Eastern Partnership in the programmes of the Lithuanian and Latvian presidencies of the Council, and the special role accorded to EU-Central Asia relations by the Latvian presidency, as well as multiple cooperation projects in many areas all testify to the lasting commitment of the Baltic States to developing democracy and good governance in the two regions.

However, so far the Baltic States have not left a decisive mark on the EU policies towards civil society in countries of the Eastern Partnership and Central Asia. This policy brief presents a summary of the challenges faced by civil society in the countries of Eastern Partnership and Central Asia, and outlines suggestions for new engagement on behalf of the EU that Baltic States can undertake in order to create an enabling environment for civil society as facilitator of reforms. It was developed as a follow-up to the conference "Working with Civil Society to Find Effective Solutions and Improve Governance: Towards better EU Impact in Partner Countries" organised in Riga in October 2015, by PROVIDUS with the support of Europe for Citizens programme.

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Challenges to the role of civil society organisations in promoting democratic reforms and good governance

Empowered civil society organisations (CSOs) can be efficient interlocutors between the government and the public. They can produce quality evidence-based policy advice and research and they can successfully perform various watchdog-type activities on governmental policy. To fulfil these roles, CSOs need to be sustainable and need to improve their own capacity constantly. While remaining true to their core mission, CSOs need to retain enough flexibility and creativity to refocus their work on topical issues where policy need arises and project-based funding is available – such as, for example, visa liberalisation process in Ukraine.

The advisory role of civil society, coming up with new ideas for improving public policy, and the watchdog role, monitoring governments' commitment to good governance and human rights, cannot be fulfilled when political and legal limitations are used by the authorities to suppress independent critics. Governments that do not trust civil society and sometimes see it as agents of foreign (implying hostile) interests, seek to limit the scope of operations of vocal CSOs by putting in place legal barriers, and relegate civil society to the role of social service providers. This is the case in Azerbaijan and Belarus among Eastern Partnership countries. This is also increasingly the case in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the two countries where government controls and obstacles in the way of independent civil society are becoming more salient. For instance, in Tajikistan, according to new legal framework, the CSOs need to approve their projects and funders with the government every time they receive a grant. Turkmenistan has not had a space for independent civil society organisations to operate for many years, and in Uzbekistan this space has traditionally been very restricted and totally submitted to government control.

On the other hand, in countries where reformist forces came to power, such as Georgia in the mid-2000s and Ukraine in 2014, large parts of policy-oriented civil society entered government or parliament, leading some donors to concentrate their support solely on government activities and withdrawing a part of the support for civil society organisations. The remaining civil society activists are sometimes seen in such context as unfair critics of government, which is already having a hard time due to the burden of reforms and foreign pressures.

Even where governments are subject to democratic controls, CSOs often struggle in having their voice or ideas heard on important subject matters, such as European integration. This has been the case in Armenia in recent years.

The institutional sustainability and policy capacity of CSOs remains problematic, particularly in Central Asia, due to the lack of instruments that would enable smaller organisations to apply for project grants on a regular basis (the majority of CSOs in both regions are small). European Union funds (EuropeAid grants) are as a rule not accessible for the majority of local CSOs as the minimum grant amounts are big and require considerable administrative and financial capacity.

New risks and influences

Currently, civil society in many Eastern Partnership and Central Asia countries is under stress from new risk factors, that have not been so prominent when Eastern Partnership was formed and when

EU strategy for Central Asia was developed. Religious radicalisation is becoming a threat in Central Asia, according to International Crisis Group.¹ Many civil society organisations in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan share this concern, and seek to work with youth to prevent radicalisation. These efforts are occasionally thwarted by governments, which adopt a punitive approach.

The legal and political environment for CSOs has become much more restrictive in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, where governments, for different reasons, are increasingly eliminating opportunities for CSOs to work with foreign donors. The influence of geopolitical polarisation is also felt in Central Asia, and Russia is increasingly followed as a role model for state control of CSOs by such countries as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which seek to outlaw some donors (e.g. USAID in Kyrgyzstan and European Endowment for Democracy in Tajikistan), rendering it increasingly difficult for civil society to find resources enabling it to participate in policy dialogue as independent partners.

The role of the European Union as a donor

Currently the European Union (EU) as a major donor in Eastern Partnership and Central Asia countries has a limited impact on creating an enabling environment for civil society as advisor to the governments and watchdog of citizen's rights and principles of good governance.

The EU's understanding of the local circumstances is sometimes not sufficient. For example, for a number of years its representation - in terms of number of offices and officers - in Central Asia has been minimal, although funding allocated in aid to the region is substantial.

When discussing cooperation framework and aid-related issues with governments, the EU sometimes tends to follow only the agenda of the government on matters that are not of immediate pragmatic interest to the EU (e.g. energy and security). The perspective of civil society of respective countries is not necessarily taken into consideration, nor is their analytical and policy capacity seen as a priority for EU support in order to provide better inputs into policy process.

While the EU is often the largest donor, it is also a slow one. The support of more flexible smaller donors, capable of reacting to changes in the environment, is essential for civil society sustainability, but not always possible due to legal and political restrictions.

Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia² do not go beyond reinforcing, in general terms, the objectives and priority areas of the 2007 EU Strategy for Central Asia, which was accepted under vastly different political circumstances. While the Council Conclusions still emphasise the importance of democratisation and human rights, they do not propose new mechanisms for strengthening capacity of civil society to support good governance and reforms.

On the positive side, the EU as a big donor still has a wide range of instruments at its disposal. It also enjoys a high reputation in most countries in the regions that are the focus of this brief, even in countries where other major western donors, such as the US government, are viewed with suspicion.

¹ International Crisis Group (2015) [Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia](#)

² Council of the European Union (2015) [Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia \(2015\)](#)

The recent review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) includes some positive indications, such as the statement that “sub-national, national and intra-regional civil society should be supported further, both through direct means and through facilitating other organisations’ involvement”. It also mentions the special role of European Endowment for Democracy in this process.³ It is particularly important to ensure that Central Asia, too, is included among the regions covered by this support, to counter the ‘policy borrowing’ of authoritarian methods to limit civil society, currently happening among post-Soviet states in the region.

New role for the EU in supporting civil society as a partner in democratisation and good governance

Given the volatile and risk-prone geopolitical environment in both regions, but especially in Central Asia, and the urgency of reforms in many Eastern Partnership countries, the EU should invest more effort in redefining its ways to support civil society in the region. A particular priority should be given to the ‘high end’ policy-oriented CSOs that may not have a massive administrative and financial capacity, but have expertise and are able of raising the overall quality of policy dialogue. New instruments are needed that emphasise not only coalitions (as EuropeAid calls increasingly do), but also a combination of local advocacy or policy NGOs and local action-oriented NGOs addressing social issues. The model of cooperation under which all political and analytical capacity in NGO consortia is provided by partners from EU Member States is not ideal, as it does little to encourage the growth of local expertise.

Given the difficulties faced by CSOs in a number of countries in Central Asia and Eastern Partnership region, it would be advisable to make more targeted support available to grow the policy capacity of local CSOs, and to create mechanisms for re-granting, that would enable swift reactions to the changing and challenging environment for human and civil rights. For instance, delegating purpose-oriented funding for CSOs to a platform of Member States that have good cooperation with countries in the regions could be a way to make EU support for civil society more accessible. This support should be strategic, i.e. linked to medium-term and long-term objectives of the EU in the region. It should also emphasise the development of policy and analytical capacity of CSOs as one of the priorities, to enable them to contribute meaningfully in their advisory role.

CSOs need to be involved and consulted in both setting EU conditionality for governmental reform plans and in monitoring the implementation of these plans. The EU should be firm in its stance to involve CSOs in implementation and allocate some funding for this purpose.

The EU should also consider civil society development strategically as part of three-factor model:

- Enabling the CSO-friendly environment in a particular country;
- Improving the governmental capacity to cooperate with CSOs;
- Encourage and fund the emergence of strong CSOs – focusing on their capacity building, assessment and watchdog-type activities.

³ European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2015) [Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy](#). Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

New role for the Baltic States

Council Conclusions underline the need for individual Member States to assume a more prominent role in the implementation of EU projects, dialogues and platforms with Central Asian countries. Member States can and should assume a more prominent role in supporting civil society in Eastern Partnership and Central Asia regions in cooperation with the EU or coordinating on behalf of the EU. The EU cannot do it alone due to various institutional and political limitations – Member State resources are needed, especially with regard to capacity on the ground via embassies and other forms of bilateral cooperation.

The Baltic States are ideally placed to assume such a role due to their historical links to Eastern Partnership countries and Central Asia, sharing common experience of Soviet Union and post-communist transition. Many policy actors in the Baltic States have sufficient knowledge of the local context, and engage in bilateral cooperation with civil society actors in the region. This experience can be scaled up if resources are made available, and good practices and lessons learned can be shared with other EU actors.

The Baltic States could become more pro-active in proposing new instruments and mechanisms of support for civil society in both regions by the EU. They could also create a platform for furthering cooperation programmes that include raising the capacity not only of public administration, but also of civil society organisations that take part in policy dialogue. The experience of EU-based CSOs already working in the regions, including CSOs from the Baltic States, should be taken into consideration when developing such a platform.