

Can the Eastern Partnership Program of the EU Help Civil Societies in Participating States?

By Ghia Nodia, Tbilisi

Abstract

The European Union's Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum exemplifies the EU's vague foreign policy initiatives toward its eastern neighbors. However, the civil society organizations that make up the Forum have sought to transform it into a meaningful instrument for the support of civil society in fledgling democracies and autocracies in eastern Europe. Through lobbying efforts, as well as developing and implementing a variety of communication plans, their efforts may help promote incremental change.

Vagueness and the Need for Creativity

It is conventional wisdom among analysts and politicians that, so far, the EU's Eastern Partnership Program (EaP) is an empty shell. It began as a political initiative proposed by the Polish and Swedish leadership and was more or less reluctantly accepted by the rest of Europe. The sense of confusion in the wake of the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war contributed to the decision: Europe felt it had to respond but did not know how. Europeans could not agree on any strong response to Russia ("there is no way to isolate Russia" was the dictum of the day). The result was a tacit recognition that Russia could get away with what it had done in August. But this acquiescence had to be balanced by at least some gesture showing that Europe would not really accept the former Soviet Union as a sphere for exclusive Russian hegemony. Launching EaP was, first and foremost, a political statement: the European Union particularly cares about developments in the geographically and culturally European part of the former Soviet Union, and is going to be present and active there.

European initiatives are well known for their vagueness and generality – especially when they are about foreign policy but do not include a promise of accession to the EU. This one may be particularly difficult to develop into something substantive. First, some countries, especially Germany, do not like any European policy that makes Russia unhappy – and Russian leaders did not hide their wrath at this initiative, which they saw as a European encroachment on their legitimate sphere of influence. Therefore, these countries will not particularly encourage filling the new European instrument with greater political and economic substance. Second, the six participating states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) are too different in their attitudes to Europe, as well as in their levels of democracy or autocracy. How to design a policy that would

be at the same time concrete and applicable to such a diverse group of countries – because all of them are also supposed to agree on those policies within bilateral and multilateral frameworks?

Creative vagueness has its strong sides too – and Europe is also known for gradually filling broad frameworks with substance, and moving forward in slow and incremental, but ultimately sure steps. Empty shells also imply opportunities: they call for specific initiatives.

A Small Color Revolution in Brussels

The story of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum may be an excellent case study. The Forum was convened in Brussels on November 16–17, 2009, and it included representatives of up to 150 civil society organizations (CSOs) from the six EaP countries, as well as European practitioners active in promoting democracy and civil society. The Forum was probably also intended as a gesture of sorts: It was supposed to demonstrate that EaP is not only about EU relations with governments (who happen to be mostly autocratic or semi-autocratic): Civil societies should be involved as well. The meeting was facilitated by a Steering Committee created by the European Commission, and the EU selected (on a competitive basis) participating organizations.

The specific way of the involving CSOs was to let them design a series of recommendations with regard to each of four thematic platforms that are supposed to constitute the substantive backbone of the new EU instrument. The recommendations were then handed to Benita Ferrero Waldner, European Commissioner in charge of External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, who expressed appreciation for the work and activism of the civil societies in the six participating countries, though – quite naturally – did not promise that all the recommendations would be taken up.

Apart from this, a parallel process also unfolded that was not part of the official Forum agenda, so it had to take part during the breaks, at night, or partly forced upon the moderators during the planned sessions. The idea of a number of organizations – the Ukrainians and Belarusians were most active, being supported by some activists from EU countries, especially Poland – was to establish an EaP Civil Society Forum as a stable self-governing organization rather than a forum for occasional meetings convened and facilitated by the EU. The Brussels meeting was to provide some source of democratic legitimacy for such an endeavor by having the attending participants elect steering committee members according to specific pre-designed quotas. So that what started as a top-down process (meeting of CSOs selected by the European Commission) would turn into a bottom-up one (CSO representatives from different countries democratically elect their own Steering Committee).

This looked somewhat like a small “color revolution” re-enacted in Brussels – after all, participants came from the countries where CSOs either had been leading forces in such revolutions, or dream of doing something similar in the future. At times debates between revolutionary CSOs and representatives of the Commission became quite heated – one participant from Belarus even accused a European facilitator of making him feel like he was in his native (autocratic) Minsk.

The democratic legitimacy of the “revolution” was questionable: Since participants themselves had been selected by the EC, they had to reluctantly admit (under some pressure) that their claim to being “national delegations” representing civil societies of respective countries was not valid. On the other hand, EC representatives grudgingly accepted the “democratically” elected 17-member Steering Committee. Everything ended in a classical European compromise. A step towards establishing a new Civil Society Forum (CSF) was made. The new Steering Committee is expected to meet in the near future in Brussels and we shall see what the new entity will be like.

EaP and Civil Society Needs

The quasi-democratic and self-governing nature of the newly established CSF is not the main issue, though. The unplanned development in Brussels only shows that CSOs in the participating states are eager to take advantage of any opportunity to enhance their status and influence, and may be capable enough to succeed – at least when faced by European bureaucrats rather than their native autocrats. Now the question is: What can the EaP do for the civil societies of the participating countries,

apart from symbolic recognition of their importance? What is the added value of the new European instrument in this respect?

The core problem is that in all EaP countries democracy is either purely formal or fledgling at best, and civil society feels either weak or endangered. In a highly notable development, Tatsiana Shaputska, a CSF participant from Belarus, was expelled from her university in early December, and it is widely believed that participation in the CSF was the real reason. Will the EaP significantly help development of democracy in those countries?

This is rather questionable. Experience shows that without the promise of membership, EU conditionality instruments are not very powerful, especially when they face fairly stable autocratic regimes like those in Belarus and Azerbaijan. However, civil society organizations there need a strong friend and protector, and the European Union could be one. It cannot turn those countries into democracies, but it can help in expanding the breathing space for civil society in them. The new CSF could be a major force lobbying Brussels to use whatever political leverage it has for this honorable task, and turn its attention to particular cases and opportunities. That is quite a job in itself.

Another big area for activity is coaching CSOs from participating countries in the European ways of doing things. The prospect of EU membership is very remote even for the countries where CSOs are fairly free to pursue their agendas, such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. But in these and all other EaP countries, prospects for advancing democracy in general, and developing civil society in particular, are largely linked to the process of moving closer to Europe. The EaP does not have an efficient mechanism of sticks and carrots expressed in conditionality – and this conditionality is to be applied to governments anyway. But CSOs can and should be major carriers of European *socialization*.

In general, EaP is an instrument supposed to make participating countries more European. This goal should be reached not only through bilateral contacts between the EU and individual states, but through the multi-lateral format of the EaP. However, the governments of participating states have very diverse agendas and varying levels of interest towards cooperating with the EU. CSOs are much more prepared for working together to Europeanize their respective countries – and they can start by Europeanizing their own milieu.

This is why, apart from the task of lobbying for greater support for civil society in EaP countries by the EU, the CSF should focus on developing and implementing a coherent *communication strategy*. In fact, there should

be multiple communication strategies. One is needed on the general EaP level, and the CSF Steering Committee will have the job of designing it. However, it may be even more important for civil society groups within participating countries to develop operational communication

instruments (especially through the Internet) to make the best use of new opportunities emerging from EaP and its CSF. These institutions will not work miracles – but as we said already, EU instruments are at their best when they work in incremental steps.

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Civil Society in Azerbaijan: Under Fire but Still Resisting

By Shain Abbasov, Baku

Abstract

The situation with basic human, civil, and political rights and freedoms has been deteriorating considerably in Azerbaijan since 2003 – the year in which a new president took office and a massive inflow of petrodollars started to fill the state coffers. Azerbaijan's democracy record has been traditionally poor, but it has worsened during the last seven years. Today, there is no political opposition or independent media. Society lives in a general sense of apathy and fear. Against this background, the country's civil society sector, which numbers more than 3,000 non-government organizations (NGOs), remains the only safeguard resisting the country's slide into full-scale dictatorship. Thus, the civil society sector is gradually becoming the main target of government attacks.

Azerbaijan's Democracy Record in 2009

The system of checks and balances between the branches of power does not work in Azerbaijan as the executive, headed by President Ilham Aliyev, exercises tight control over the legislature and judiciary. Neither parliament nor the court system provides any efficient mechanism to protect civic, property and media rights. The windfall from oil revenues, which was the basis for economic growth in Azerbaijan during recent years, as well as the country's close ties to foreign oil companies and Western states, provided the government with the confidence it needed to pursue an authoritarian path in domestic affairs. This authoritarianism works in parallel with massive corruption. According to Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index, Azerbaijan ranks a dismal 143th out of the 180 countries on the list.

Azerbaijan's democracy record worsened considerably during 2009. In January, the government canceled the FM broadcast licenses for several popular foreign radio stations, including the Azerbaijani services of Radio Liberty, the BBC and Voice of America. A popular referendum on constitutional changes conducted in March

removed the two-term limit for presidents, allowing the incumbent to remain in office indefinitely. Also in March, parliament reduced the freedom of religion by tightening state control over Muslim communities and limited freedom of speech through amendments to the laws dealing with the mass media and television and radio.

Curbing Internet Freedom and Arresting Bloggers

In 2009, the government began attacking freedom of speech on the Internet. Traditionally, this area had been a relatively free space in which young people could express their opinions and take part in vigorous debates. However, now the authorities are openly speaking out in favor of legislative restrictions and supervision over publications on the Internet. Government officials also seek to regulate audio and video products placed online.

The purpose of these efforts is to slow the development of civic journalism, including Internet TV and radio, and also to curb the growing activity of youth groups via online social networks. Due to the lack of