

influence on the substance of the documents and even though there is no ultimate membership perspective.

This study identified a number of factors to explain variation in the alignment practices of the three countries. Interest-based logic seems to play a crucial role as

alignment turns out to be high where direct or indirect material benefits can be recognized. This suggests, conversely and in a less optimistic perspective, that the EU's transformative power in its neighbourhood is seriously hampered where related benefits carry only little weight.

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Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum: The View of a Participant from Armenia

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Abstract

Civil Society is considered a major component in the architecture of change and development in the European Neighborhood. The EU supports civil society in its Neighborhood in a variety of ways: funding; supporting the issues raised by NGOs and public advocates; and joining in the struggle for human rights, free and fair elections, and other causes. While building the strategy of the Eastern Partnership and assimilating the lessons learned from the Arab spring, the EU leadership, particularly the European Commission, included a very specific element in the architecture of relations with eastern neighbors: the Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF). This is an entity which, if it works, will achieve a change in the traditional conduct of relations between the EU and its Eastern neighbors: diplomacy between governmental and EU officials will be complemented with interactions involving a third actor, namely civil society. For the first time, civil society is being asked to join a process which has been traditionally confined to the domain of governments. This is a challenging idea, and its significance surpasses any particular project support that the EC has given to civil society so far or is planning to give in the future. This effort is about making civil society a participant in power sharing on reform and raising the country closer to EU standards.

This article describes the experience of a group of NGOs from Armenia in the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. This narrative, based on elements of a participant observation, concludes that whatever support the EU and EC provide to civil society, if NGOs are incapable of ethical and professional self-determination, the reform and Civil Society Forum will not succeed. Thus, despite the fact that EU support is crucial, what is most important is the capacity of NGOs, the media, and other pillars of civil society to be able to unite for a good cause and to clean their ranks, getting rid of those who are working for the failure of reform, based on the post-Soviet traditions of imitating reform and building Potemkin Villages instead of promoting genuine change and progress.

First Steps

The idea of a special role for civil society in the Eastern Partnership was included in its constitutional process

from the beginning: in May 2009, when the process started in Prague, there was a pre-forum civil society conference, which discussed many potential mecha-

nisms for civil society engagement. Afterwards, NGOs in Eastern Partnership countries received an invitation from the EC to apply to participate in the Forum. They were selected based on certain criteria and quotas. What seemed problematic then was that it wasn't clear who sat on the selection panel, in addition to the EC, and what the selection criteria were. Talking among themselves, some of the selected NGOs from Armenia learned from each other that they had been selected, came together and discussed the lack of information about what to expect.

The first Forum was an impressive large scale event, which brought together about 300 NGOs. In a very restricted time they had to come up with the major lines of strategy for the Forum. Most of the thinking had taken place beforehand, and there was already a draft paper available, partly based on the ideas of the first organizing committee, and partly on the rare submissions from those who replied to the Call for Submissions which was circulated beforehand. The draft was discussed and amended during a short plenary session, skillfully led by Eugeniusz Smolar. While many delegates were probably unhappy, because they felt that there was not enough time to discuss issues and digest the events, the overall shape of the strategy, or at least some elements of it, were constituted then.

Knowing how difficult it is to lead the ubiquitous group of people called civil society, one should not have had exaggerated expectations. The spirit of the event, the fact that civil society was asked, with all seriousness, to come and join in the process, had such an important and significant potential, that it did not really matter that the process of including them was essentially undemocratic. In order to create such a complex network, someone had to exercise some serious leadership. If NGOs are left to themselves to discuss things, coming to a joint position may take a very long time.

The most worrying thing at the first Forum was that too much time and attention was allocated to setting up the Forum structures, instead of focusing on the content of what had to be done and defining subsequent activities.

Electing Leaders

At the same time, the process of electing national facilitators was a huge learning opportunity for everybody, since it immediately became clear that all those who are more interested in power games rather than in work, pay considerable attention to this process. During the elections, some would leave the room and consult, via mobile phones, with their superiors who apparently were government officials. Thus apparently those who were lobbying so actively and consulting governments were

GoNGOs, government-affiliated NGOs rather than authentic grassroots NGOs.

Since the elections were clearly important, the 'non-aligned' NGOs also became attentive to the process. Some already had experience and knew what to expect from the GoNGOs in such situations. Many NGOs had experience with international processes similar to this one, such as the UNHCR CIS Conference, where NGOs also played a huge role in 1999–2005; as well as national ones, such as the Millenium Challenge Corporation project in Armenia, which had an NGO monitoring group set up to accompany it. That group was 'hijacked' by GoNGOs and many genuine NGOs left it as a result.

The EaP CSF, though newborn, was going to focus on monitoring, and perhaps even facilitating, the EaP implementation process, thus there was going to be a very specific role for the NGOs. The fact that the GoNGOs became so agitated demonstrated what high significance the EaP governments had assigned to this process.

Eventually the Armenian delegation, via argument and conflict, agreed to have a secret ballot and fair elections. There were about seven candidates out of twenty something delegates. The competition was tough. Ultimately, the person who received the majority of votes won. The leaders of Armenian civil society demonstrated that they could uphold a democratic process, even though, as on Noah's Ark, they had a pair of every possible NGO in their delegation.

In hindsight it is clear that whoever selected the participants for the first Forum indeed did a fair job: it is difficult, from the outside, to discern a 'good' NGO from a 'bad' NGO, or a GoNGO from a non-GoNGO, if all of them are working actively and, it seems, promoting good causes. The task is made even more difficult because in a undemocratic society, non-GoNGOs often are the victim of negative publicity, whereas GoNGOs, to the contrary, frequently receive positive press.

Building a National Platform

Since then, the Forum delegates from Armenia tried to build consensus and failed, until recently. Among all six EaP states, Armenia made the first serious attempt to build a National Platform (NP). The fact that NPs are the main structure via which the EC would like to build its relations with EaP civil societies became obvious much later on, in a year's time.

But this first attempt in Armenia didn't work, because the GoNGOs tried to take advantage of the more liberal non-GoNGOs, by bringing fake NGOs into the platform, thereby violating its regulations, the very same rules that they had adopted earlier on. For instance, more than 10 NGOs applied for membership

in the Platform from one and the same email address. One of the NGO leaders had several NGOs under his control, and he applied in the name of one, whereas other NGOs which he led applied with other names attached. But they were all governed by one and the same person.

The conflict around the NP continued in Armenia for two years: it went through the Second Forum and finally essentially resolved itself after the Third Forum in Poznan. The Second and the Third Forum were better organized than the First one. The CSF had already acquired some identity also thanks to the work conducted between the Forums. The Steering Committees, which were elected at every Forum, comprised six National Facilitators from the target countries, eight leaders of the Working Groups (one from East and one from the EU) and three representatives of EU civil society. These very diverse 17 people had to learn to work together, deliver a united message to the EU and EaP, and promote the work in their respective constituencies. Obviously this was not an easy task, particularly since everyone was working on a voluntary basis as these positions were not paid. The opportunity existed for better financed NGOs or international NGO networks with formally organized structures to be able to subsidize their leaders for engaging in this work. This situation was dangerous, since better financed NGOs are a rare occurrence in our world of high competition and difficult funding environments for civil society, and if some exist, this may be due to the fact that they are not a 'real' NGO, but, again, a GoNGO.

Dealing with Fraud and Manipulation

In any case, the Forum gradually matures. Though, to be fair, one should also note that it has not achieved any visible breakthrough except for, perhaps, putting an end to the Armenian NP conflict. The Armenian delegates to the three consecutive Forums came together in Fall 2011 and declared that they constitute the decision making body of the National Platform, and that its work will be constructed so that it will give a chance to any NGO to engage, however, the responsibility for ensuring the platform's stability is in the hands of the delegates. This was done because the first version of the NP, which was declared void, did not contain mechanisms for protecting itself from fraud and manipulation.

Here again, skilled politicians from among the GoNGOs tried to use the tactic well known to anyone who has gone through the transition ups and downs since independence. If one wants to lower the significance of one organization, say, of a party, one creates a fake party with the same name. For instance, in Armenia in earlier years there existed two parties both called 'Dashnaktsutyun'. Today, in addition to the Open Soci-

ety Institute (the Soros Foundation), there is another NGO which calls itself the Free Society Institute, which creates certain confusion in the Armenian language. In fact this NGO follows principles very different from those of the well-known Foundation. Examples are numerous. This trick can be traced back to the tenet 'divide and rule', perhaps with an addition: 'divide, baffle the public, and rule'. The other trick is to use a positive and respectful combination of words which connote democratic values to create an entity committed to achieving the opposite. One of the famous examples is the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, which is more commonly known as the party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

The other trick is to hide the truth behind positions. A conflict is usually perceived from outside as a situation in which both sides are simultaneously correct in some things and wrong in other things. In the absence of higher arbitration, it is very difficult for an outside observer to distinguish who is right and who is wrong, and the usual approach is to try to make peace between both rather than to adjudicate and give the victory to one side. There is no arbitration system yet which can distinguish between the intrigues of GoNGOs and fake NGOs and the normal behavior of an NGO. This is possible to do, and for a long time some in the Civil Society Forum have advocated conducting an NGO audit. Probably it will become possible soon.

However, even in the absence of such a methodology and criteria, the majority of the Armenian delegates from the three Forums were still able to resolve the conflict. What did they do? First, they didn't let it go. They didn't allow the fake platform promoters to get what they wanted. This required courage and determination. Second, they asked for arbitration: they approached the Steering Committee with a request to arbitrate, albeit informally, in the form of sending an observer to their decision-making process. The Steering Committee recognized that their actions corresponded to the rules and supported them.

Now, finally, the conflict is resolved and there is only one National Platform in Armenia. It welcomes all those who want to join and work for advancing civil society and democracy and for pushing Armenia closer to European standards. This was a small victory for genuine civil society, which should be nurtured and built upon.

Conclusion

Looking back, one can note that the conflict, though tough, was worthwhile: it gave a chance to genuine NGOs to unite and to all those who were observing the situation to differentiate genuine NGOs from GoNGOs. If at the beginning of the process no outsider and not many insiders could distinguish clearly GoNGOs from

authentic organizations, now it is easier to do. It is easier now to work out the criteria for an NGO audit. It is easier to gather lessons learned from the process in order not to repeat the same mistakes in the future. It is easier also to find a niche, a proper role for GoNGOs, if they, of course, abandon their habits of manipulation and engage in serious work, which is unlikely.

Since this is unlikely, the conflict is not over yet: there should be constant preparedness to react properly to the attempts of GoNGOs to ‘hijack’ genuine civil society processes. Here the role of international organizations and particularly of EU Delegations is crucial. Newcomers can easily be attracted to GoNGOs. GoNGOs may be camouflaged behind highly educated, bright and well dressed prosperous individuals with excellent English skills who use exactly the right buzzwords. Or, to the contrary, they may use the image of a genuine grassroots person, with imperfect language skills, who overtly express his or her healthy skepticism about the West–East relationship. It is, in a way, a dream of those internationals who help these countries to become more democratic and prosperous to see strong NGOs which cooperate with governments; isn’t this an indication that change is taking place? It is so comfortable to ask an NGO for help dealing with a difficult government official and get what one needs. Isn’t this an indication of the high influence and standing that NGOs enjoy in the given society?

The leaders of these NGOs can smartly explain why it is that their government is still less democratic than it promises, dwell on how difficult it is to overcome

the post-soviet condition at length, and emphasize that change does not happen overnight. They have sung this song now for 20 years since independence.

But it’s not that difficult to distinguish the truth from falsehood: we know that the governments are not democratic; we know that elections are not being conducted in a free and fair manner; we know that corruption is rampant; more in one country than in another, but still, there is a long way to go. Governments should prove their democratic inclinations via easily discernible commonsensical actions, so that the ordinary citizen notices the change. Elements of this have taken place in some or all EaP countries, but in some cases change is slow or non-existent; and even successful change raises the issue whether it is sustainable or not. NGOs, particularly those working on democracy and human rights issues, should be skeptical about the governments, and governments should be ready for non-stop healthy criticism. Those governments who shy away from that healthy criticism utilize the mechanism of GoNGOs to divert attention from their shortcomings. GoNGOs will continue to function as a mechanism to divert the attention of the international community, and sometimes of the domestic one, from real challenges and problems and to present ‘Potemkin villages’ in the place of the real situation, as long as governments are not sufficiently reformist or there is no political will for serious reform. GoNGOs will present their position as principles, beliefs or values, but in fact they are serving the purpose of those who have accumulated wealth and power via unfair and/or illegal means. Let us be aware of this.

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Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan is the country director for the Eurasia Partnership Foundation in Armenia. The views presented in this article may not coincide with the views of Eurasia Partnership Foundation.