

Results of the consultations with CSOs and NGOs on the creation of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

1. Introduction

In its Communication on the Eastern Partnership of 3 December 2008 the European Commission (EC) proposed “to establish an **Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum** to promote contacts among CSOs and facilitate their dialogue with public authorities”.

The Eastern Partnership Summit on 7 May 2009 endorsed the Commission’s proposal and in joint declaration invited “the European Commission to develop and propose modalities for the establishment of a Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership”¹.

To ensure the transparency of the process leading to the establishment of the EaP Civil Society Forum (CSF), all interested parties were invited to provide their opinion via links on the web sites of EC/External Relations and of the EC delegations in partner countries.

The call was made under the title “Invitation to contribute to an opinion on the Eastern Partnership Forum” and was available in English, French and Russian. It proposed a series of 4 questions, respectively: I. on the contribution of the CSF to the goals of the EaP; II. on participation in the work of the CSF; III. on the CSF structures and their links with the EaP multilateral track; IV. on the role of the EC in the process.

The consultation process started at the end of March and was closed on April 25. Some 40 contributions were received, mainly from civil society organisations based in the Eastern Partner countries but also from several EU-based organisations.

The European Economic and Social Committee in its opinion adopted on May 13 on “Involvement of Civil society in the Eastern partnership”² very positively welcomed the EC proposal to establish an EaP CSF and expressed its wish to be given a key role in this initiative, building on its important experience and know how. It suggested that the CSF could meet at least once a year and set up working groups to address specific issues at the level of the panels of the EaP. The CSF would also be given the possibility to “draft proposals and recommendation for EU representatives and partner country government”.

The present paper aims at providing a reasoned analysis of contributions received. It also presents a selection method chosen by the Commission from the proposals made and criteria to be applied in the selection process.

¹ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/107589.pdf

² http://eescopinions.eesc.europa.eu/EESCOpinionDocument.aspx?identifier=ces\rex\rex271\ces889-2009_ac.doc&language=EN

2. Contribution of the Civil Society Forum to the goals of the Eastern Partnership

Role of the Forum

According to the consulted parties, the CSF should contribute to the objectives of the Eastern Partnership by:

- facilitating networking between CSOs and consolidating their role in the Eastern Partner countries;
- providing technical support to EaP bilateral and multilateral activities;
- promoting the EU/ENP/EaP principles and values in the Eastern Partner countries.

Scope of the CSF activities

A large range of activity areas was mentioned by the consulted parties. In addition to democracy, human rights and people to people contacts, several CSOs thought that the Forum should provide an input in the economic and social fields. No mention was made of energy policy, although this topic could be contained in a wider reflection on the environment and climate change.

3. Choice of the participants and selection process

Consulted parties favoured a comprehensive approach, allowing for the participation of a wide range of CSOs including trade unions, employers' organisations, professional associations, NGOs, think-tanks, non-profit foundations, national and international CSOs/networks and other relevant Civil Society actors.

While several contributions stressed the need to involve small and medium-sized CSOs (because of their proximity to local populations and to provide them with the opportunity to integrate into civil society networks), some others requested to give priority to national and/or transnational CSOs. A few CSOs requested to allow applications from third country organisations and from organisations based in non-recognised entities.

The Commission shares the opinion that a wide range of CSOs from the EaP Partner Countries, but also from EU Member States and international organisations/networks shall be able to participate in the CSF.

Three options emerged in the consultation for the selection process of the participants:

- choice by the EC on the basis of a list of criteria;
- elections organised in each country by CSOs themselves;
- open participation, i.e. public call for registration from the EC.

A particularly relevant proposal was to first establish a database of interested CSOs (on the basis of an EC call for expression of interest) from Eastern Partner countries, EU Member States, interested third countries and transnational CSOs/networks, to process the selection at a second stage.

Taking into account that: 1) selection by the EC would not be compatible with the open spirit of the CSF; 2) elections in each EaP country by CSOs themselves is not a practicable solution; 3) given the heterogeneity of the organisations concerned; and 4) differing situations in EaP partner countries and EU MS, the Commission proposes the following procedure:

An expression of interest to participate in the EaP CSF followed by a selection on the basis of transparent criteria, as listed below

A large number of different criteria for the selection were proposed. These are the **selection criteria that Commission will take into consideration:**

- **Geographic origin/nationality** – a majority of CSF participants should come from the CSOs from EaP partner countries (and their number per each partner country should be balanced). However an important number of participants should also come from EU MS and international organisations/networks to allow for exchange of experience in the EU affairs/policies (as one of the main goals of the EaP is to bring Eastern partner countries closer to the EU). CSOs from third countries may also be invited;
- **Diversity and proportionality** – participants should represent all variety of civil society actors (trade unions, employers' organisations, professional associations, NGOs, think-tanks, non-profit foundations, national and international CSOs/networks and other relevant Civil Society actors). They should be able to contribute to all thematic aspects of the EaP i.e.: 1) Democracy, good governance and stability; 2) Economic integration and convergence with EU policies; 3) Environment, climate change & energy security; 4) Contacts between people;
- **Experience in the EU/ENP/EaP matters** (taking into account past and current activities and results achieved).

While applying the criteria listed above in the selection process the Commission will also take into account the specificity of each of the partner countries.

The participating organisations should be motivated by and willing to contribute to the objectives of the EaP.

Certain organisations may be willing and able to cover the expenses linked to their participation in the CSF but this will not be retained as a selection criterion.

4. CSF structures and their interaction with EaP multilateral structures

CSF organisation

Consensus emerged on holding of CSF conferences at regular intervals (once a year was suggested most of the time). The opinion of consulted CSOs also converged on the

principle to establish thematic working groups reflecting the priorities of the EaP multilateral track.

Another matter of general interest was the idea of the creation of a CSF website and network.

Consulted parties expressed the wish for a decentralised managed structure. At the central level, several contributions called for the establishment of a secretariat and/or an executive organ which would be managed by CSOs themselves (with EC assistance). At the local/country level, the parties wished to create a network of national structures that would report to the CSF central structures.

Interaction with the EaP multilateral structures

The consulted parties suggested that the CSF could interact with the EaP multilateral structures by:

- participating in the exchange of experience, knowledge and good practices – this would involve access to the working documents of the platforms and/or the ministerial meetings;
- providing advice and guidance to the platforms;
- monitoring, controlling and assessing the platform activities, possibly leading to the production of public reports;
- providing opinions and positions for consideration in the relevant thematic platforms and/or ministerial meetings.

Several contributions proposed the creation of “coordinators” responsible for the relations between the CSF and the EaP multilateral structures. It was suggested that the CSF would be “physically” represented in the EaP multilateral meetings, with an observer status.

5. Role of the European Commission

The contributions were very broadly in favour of an important role for the EC, not only during the kick off process, but also during later stages. Concerning the launching of the CSF, there was overall consensus that the EC should organise the first conference. Some contributions also proposed that the EC be responsible for the initial definition of the CSF’s working agenda and its objectives.

In the longer term, it was suggested that the EC should fulfil the following functions:

- Provision of financial, logistic and technical support to the forum meetings and activities (including i.a provision of expertise, website maintaining, visa assistance, etc.);
- Coordination between CSF and EaP platform activities, notably by providing relevant information;
- Political support to CSF activities (dialog with local authorities, promotion of the CSF as an essential component of the EaP).