

PRESS RELEASE

Civil Society Forum Brings Leaders from EU's Neighbours to Berlin

The second Civil Society Forum of the EU's Eastern Partnership will bring more than 300 representatives of nongovernmental organizations from the EU's six eastern neighbours and from the EU member states to Berlin, November 18–19.

Citizens from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are building a road to Europe, making up for democratic shortcomings and their state failures, and the EU has opened its policy process to include civil society.

Over the two days of the Forum, they will discuss the state of democracy in their countries, economic development, regional cooperation, how other European groups and EU member states can help them improve their situations, and how to build cross-country linkages to advance European values throughout the eastern neighbourhood.

The Civil Society Forum is meeting in the German Foreign Office, and for two days Berlin will be the center of European discussions held by the leaders and key thinkers in the six countries of the eastern neighbourhood. The Forum is organized and sponsored by the European Commission; its day-to-day functions are managed by a Steering Committee elected by the representatives of civil society.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fühle will give keynote addresses, and other crucial decision-makers in Europe's eastern policy will be participating in the Forum. "Enlargement is more than just a public policy and more than a Commissioner's portfolio. It has transformed my country, my life and the whole of Europe," Fühle, who is Czech, told the European Parliament earlier this year.

Holding the Civil Society Forum at the Foreign Office signals the importance of the eastern neighbourhood, both for Germany and for Europe. The neighbours' road to closer integration with the European Union should be one built by the citizens, in contrast to older, top-down methods. By supporting the groups of civil society, Germany boosts these efforts throughout the eastern neighbourhood. By strengthening civil society, Germany and the EU strengthen democracy throughout the six neighbours, and help pave the way for a road to Europe that is made by citizens working together. The Forum will also help to broaden dialogue and cooperation between civil society and governments in the six neighbouring countries.

In addition to the official program of the Civil Society Forum at the Foreign Office, a major program of additional events will take place at locations across Berlin. For example, there will be debates about whether the Eastern Partnership is actually an alternative to EU membership, what the future of the Eastern Partnership should be, what policies the civil society representatives from the eastern neighbourhood should recommend, and how the eastern neighbours can help Europe connect with civil society in Russia.

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