

THE CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP FOUR YEARS ON PROGRESS, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Established in 2009, during the Eastern Partnership Summit in Prague, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum supports the development of civil society organisations from the EU-28 and the six Partnership countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. After four years of operation, the Secretariat of the Forum's Steering Committee commissioned CEPS to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of its programme. This report singles out the institutionalisation and socialisation inculcated among its members as the Forum's greatest accomplishment. In contrast to its internal developments, it argues that the external policy successes of the Forum remain modest. This report is the first attempt to conduct an in-depth assessment of the Forum's Annual Assembly, the Steering Committee and its Secretariat, the Working Groups and National Platforms. Ten actionable recommendations are put forward aimed at improving the Civil Society Forum's standing and performance.

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The Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership four years on Progress, challenges and prospects

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Executive Summary and Recommendations

This study evaluates the work of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Civil Society Forum (CSF), an institutionalised platform for civil society cooperation consisting of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from the European Union (EU) and the EaP countries, namely, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The members of the Steering Committee are the leaders of the various structures of the CSF and are charged with, inter alia, ensuring the unity of the Forum. However, the linkages between the different structures of the CSF do not always function well. Moreover, the Steering Committee's record for advocating in Brussels and in the EU member states' capitals has not been consistent.

The format of dividing responsibilities among five Working Groups makes the substantive work of the CSF manageable, and the members of the CSF choose to join the Working Group that is closest to their field of interest. By entering into a Working Group the civil society organisations (CSOs) commit to working together year-round. Nevertheless, a limited number of organisations are active between the meetings.

Six National Platforms, which are at the heart of the CSF, are tools to facilitate a dialogue between the CSOs in each of the six EaP countries, their respective governments and EU institutions. However, the acceptance of the National Platform by the respective EaP government differs across the countries. Moreover, in general terms, the National Platforms are given more recognition by EU officials than by the EaP governments. Capitalising on EU support for the purpose of increasing leverage in their relations with their authorities is more feasible for those CSOs whose governments are more inclined toward European integration.

The biggest achievement of the CSF in the past four years is its own institutionalisation as well as the socialisation that has taken place among its members. However, the Forum's policy successes remain modest. The CSF advocated in favour of launching of the Civil Society Facility, which was established to support the development of civil society. The National Platforms and the Steering Committee contributed to the drafting of the roadmap for the Eastern Partnership's Vilnius Summit in November 2013. The Steering Committee moreover successfully advocated for the European Parliament to send an observation mission to the presidential elections in Azerbaijan in 2013. In cooperation with Georgia's State Ministry for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, the Georgian National Platform played a key role in conceptualising the "Communication and Information Strategy on EU Integration for 2014–2017".

In addition to a critical assessment of the development of the CSF over four years, this study puts forward several recommendations for the further action aimed at improving the standing of the Forum, which can be summed up in ten interlinked points:

- The CSF has become a platform for the EU's and its Eastern partner countries' civil society organisations to engage in socialisation, resulting in a high degree of internalisation of European norms and values. This characteristic of the Forum needs to be maintained in the future since there are new participants attending the CSF every year.
- The CSF has succeeded in creating a highly sophisticated and functional institutional architecture. Therefore, at this stage, the members of the Forum should stop spending time in engaging in long processes that amount to navel-gazing but should direct their efforts toward achieving results externally.
- The Steering Committee should consider changing the term of the civil society delegates participating in the Forum from one to two years and use the time and energy that is currently spent in the selection process every year to produce more substantive output.
- Some EU officials acknowledge that in specific policy areas the recommendations of the CSF have been useful. The Forum has to continue to improve the quality of its reports and recommendations in the rest of the areas covered by its Working Groups.
- Participation in the EaP inter-governmental platforms by the members of the CSF has proved valuable. However, its effectiveness could be maximised if organisational issues were improved (e.g., invitations sent by EU officials at an earlier stage, better preparedness of the CSF delegates to offer civil society's own contributions).
- For the newly created Secretariat of the Steering Committee to realise its potential, it needs to have a mid-term institutional budget line and more than two staff members. In order to make the Forum more effective, the members of the Steering Committee should allow the Secretariat to develop into a real executive body that has power to harmonise procedures and lead on more strategic issues.
- Attending the annual Assembly is not the end goal of joining the CSF but the beginning of (at least) one year of collaborative effort. Toward this end, the Working Groups of the Forum ought to live up to their name.
- The National Platforms' composition should mirror that of the CSF as much as possible. The leadership of some National Platforms have to work toward making the Platforms more inclusive rather than dominated by specific groups of NGOs. The selection criteria and membership of the EU CSOs in the CSF require urgent clarification.
- The CSOs' monitoring of the implementation of the EaP countries' commitments as well as awareness-raising activities have to be more clearly geared toward influencing official decision-making in those states.
- The CSF mirrors the major weakness of the wider civil society participants, that is, their detachment from the broader populace in the EaP countries. Every activity within the framework of the Forum should include the component of (re)connecting the CSOs with the society at large. There can be no civil society activism detached from the people they presume to represent.

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1. Introduction

The idea of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Civil Society Forum (CSF) was put forward by the European Commission (Commission) in 2008 in order to enhance the EU's support for civil society organisations (CSOs) in the countries of the EaP, namely, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The Commission's communication that first broached the idea in particular suggested establishing a CSF¹ "to promote contacts among CSOs and facilitate their dialogue with public authorities" (European Commission, 2008). Following the Commission's communication, the interested parties in both the EU and the EaP countries were invited to contribute to the CSF concept paper (EaP CSF, 2009) in four areas, namely, the CSF's goals, participation and structures linked to the EaP multilateral framework and the role of the Commission in the process. Following months of consultations, the CSF concept paper was endorsed at the first EaP Summit in Prague.²

The concept paper outlines the goals of the CSF, which intends to enrich the EaP by adding the perspective of the civil society through recommendations, evaluation and monitoring of EaP activities including the multilateral thematic platforms (subject areas for discussion) and ministerial meetings. The CSF provides a platform for sharing best practices of European integration and holding regular discussions on promoting the multilateral track of the EaP. Institutionally, the creation of the CSF also aims to contribute to capacity building of the CSOs of the EaP countries through enhancing dialogue with the EU CSOs, social partners, think tanks, EU institutions including the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and international organisations. CSOs from the EaP countries and EU member states active in one or more EaP countries are welcome to participate (EaP CSF, 2009).

Institutionally, the CSF consists of a number of entities: the annual Assembly, the Steering Committee with its Secretariat, five Working Groups with their respective sub-groups and six National Platforms. Over the four-plus years of its existence, the members of the CSF have actively socialised,³ produced a considerable amount of statements and resolutions and held five annual Assemblies. The first annual Assembly, in which more than 200 CSOs participated, took place in Brussels 16–17 November 2009. The CSF at that time adopted four recommendations – one from each existing Working Group. The second annual Assembly was held in Berlin on 18–19 November 2010, where, *inter alia*, the Steering Committee's first report was presented. The third and fourth annual Assemblies took place in Poznan in 2011

¹ The EU has also set up institutionalised civil society cooperation with other regions and countries, e.g., the Civil Society Regional Programme in the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean, as well as efforts involving Russia and Mexico.

² http://www.eeas.europa.eu/eastern/civil_society.

³ For more on 'socialisation', see Checkel (2005).

and Stockholm in 2012. In 2013, the CSF met for the first time in one of the EaP countries, in Chisinau, Moldova.⁴

The Commission funds the annual Assembly and Working Group meetings and contributes to the budget of the Steering Committee. The budget for the annual Assembly held in 2013 amounted to €270,000. In 2013, CSF also spent €41,000 on the Working Group meetings and €19,000 on the Steering Committee. Additionally, the Commission funds a project on strengthening National Platforms (see more below). Besides the Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic annually announces small grants (circa €15,000 per applicant) for projects in line with Working Group 1 (democracy, human rights, good governance and stability) and Working Group 4 (contacts between people). This funding is not specifically earmarked for the CSF, but many organisations from the respective Working Groups apply. In some countries, the CSOs involved in the National Platforms are additionally supported by donors such as EU Delegations, some EU member states, their agencies and the Open Society Foundations (OSF).

The academic and policy-oriented literature has analysed the development of the civil society after the collapse of the Soviet Union, focusing on the role of civil society in democratic transition (Encarnación, 2003; Celichowski, 2004; Bhatt and Seckinelgin, 2012) in the western Balkans (Greenberg, 2010; Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Ker-Lindsay and Kostovicova, 2013) and in the post-Soviet sphere (e.g., Henderson, 2003; Hemment, 2012; Raik 2006; Ishkanian, 2014). However, the literature has not given sufficient attention to the development of the most institutionalised form of the civil society cooperation, that is, the CSF. This study aims to analyse critically the four-plus years of the CSF's activities and outline recommendations to help make it work better.

Methodologically, the analysis draws on extensive triangulation of collected data from multiple sources. The study examines official documents and communications and a survey conducted by the Secretariat of the Steering Committee of the CSF.⁵ These data are complemented by observations from 19 interviews with current and former members of the CSF (e.g., members of the Steering Committee, Working Groups, National Platforms), observers and official institutions.

Since its establishment, the CSF has become an important meeting ground for the EU and EaP CSOs that facilitates familiarisation with the values and norms promoted by the EU. In the course of its four-year existence much energy and time has gone into establishing the institutional structure of the Forum. The CSOs participating in the CSF conduct independent monitoring, issue declarations and initiate actions that reflect the values promoted by the EU. However, the CSF's policy achievements are modest, and the Forum has not managed substantially to influence the content of the official EaP proceedings.

This paper is structured as follows: First, it briefly discusses the achievements and challenges of the CSF. Subsequently, it focuses on socialisation dynamics within the Forum. In the subsequent sections, the analysis moves beyond navel-gazing to discuss the influence of the CSF at the inter-governmental level of the Eastern Partnership. The assessment of the Steering Committee and its newly established Secretariat is followed by the analysis of the

⁴ <http://www.eap-csf.eu>.

⁵ 93 participants in the most recent CSF in Chisinau have filled out the questionnaire; this amounts to one-third of participants of the Forum. Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 12 November 2013 (<http://www.eap-csf.eu/en/news-events/news/how-you-assess-the-civil-society-forum-93-respondents-took-part-in-a-survey/>).

five Working Groups and six National Platforms. The conclusions sum up and reflect on the main findings.

2. The Civil Society Forum: Achievements and challenges

In less than five years, the Civil Society Forum (CSF) has managed to establish an impressive institutional structure. The annual Assembly is the best-known component of the CSF. Since its founding, hundreds of organisations have participated in the Assembly of the CSF (more than 200 CSOs in each year). In the latest Forum in Chisinau, Moldova, 26–27 CSOs per Eastern Partnership (EaP) country and 67 organisations from all EU member states were selected as full participants with voting rights (see Table 1). The diversity among the organisations is enormous. Some of the members of the Forum are well-established NGOs; others are organisationally weaker. The CSF as a whole has struggled to achieve ‘unity in diversity’ and collective action.

The issue of maintaining a ‘unified’ Forum – not to be confused with uniformity – is at the heart of its potential for influence. A systematic and in-depth discussion is needed at all levels of the CSF on how to achieve unity of values and rules while encouraging diversity of opinions. Thus far, the Forum has addressed the issue only through employing *ex ante* mechanisms; that is, only the CSOs that share the values and principles of the EaP can participate in the CSF. However, the *ex ante* screening is not sufficient by itself. The unifying strategic priorities behind the Forum such as European integration, cultivating a European perspective for the Eastern neighbours and implanting EU norms and standards need to guide not only the rhetoric of the CSF but also its concerted actions throughout the year, not just during the two-day Assembly meetings. The Forum should increase the number of common projects developed by its member NGOs as well as the number of letter and advocacy campaigns aiming to strengthen the voice of civil society in both the bilateral and multilateral dimensions of the EaP.

The general strategy of the CSF to work toward the European integration of the EaP countries can be broken down into more concrete strategic priorities. In general terms, the CSF ought to pursue three goals: 1) socialisation aiming to achieve normative suasion,⁶ 2) influencing government policies at both the agenda-setting (at the EU and EaP partner level) and implementation (e.g., through monitoring) stages and 3) influencing the societies in the EaP countries through raising public awareness and encouraging active civic participation.

2.1 Socialisation: CSF as a foundation for solidarity

The CSF is foremost a space for civil society participants from the EaP and the EU to meet, discuss, exchange opinions, learn about each other and stay connected beyond the annual Assembly and Working Group meetings. It has indeed become a fantastic tool to establish relationships and trust and to develop a sense of solidarity. One of the leaders of the Forum shares his experiences: “I see how the organisations learn from each other through working in common projects. They comprehend better what works and what does not work” (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013).

⁶ ‘Normative suasion’ is understood as the most far-reaching form of socialisation, that is, actors actively and reflectively internalise appropriate norms and behave accordingly (for more, see Checkel, 2005).

The analysis reveals that the interaction between the CSOs from different countries leads to a high degree of internalisation of European norms (see also Kostanyan and Vandecasteele, 2013). The majority of CSOs from the EaP countries express a wish to belong to the Forum and to adhere to its principles. However, the members of the Forum admit that, as opposed to the extensive contacts between the CSOs of the EaP countries themselves, the socialisation between the EaP and the EU organisations can and should be improved. The exchange of information and thoughts regarding best practices between organisations from both sides of the Partnership is a precondition for realisation of the potential of the multilateral Forum.

Within the various structures of the CSF, the EU's officials and CSOs take care not to lecture the NGOs from EaP countries but act according to strictures of serious deliberative discussion. Moreover, the interactions between the EU civil society representatives and those from the EaP NGOs take place in non-politicised and informal settings. These courtesies facilitate high-level of socialisation and the smooth transfer of norms and values.

2.2 Moving beyond navel-gazing: Influence at the inter-governmental level

In contrast to the high degree of socialisation between the CSOs internally, the CSF has struggled to exert serious influence on the inter-governmental dimension of the EaP. There is a consensus among the CSOs that European integration is the best option for all countries concerned. However, the members of the NGOs lack a strategy on how to reach the authorities and become an opinion shaper. The CSF has thus far remained an underutilised instrument for lobbying EU officials and especially most of the EaP governments.

The members of the CSF think that one of the biggest achievements of the Forum is the attention paid to their contributions by EU officials from the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Commission directors-general and especially Štefan Füle, the commissioner for enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy. However, the involvement of members of the CSF in the EaP countries' national decision-making remains low and varies across the partner countries (this is discussed further below).

The CSF has been given a number of institutionalised tools to have its voice heard by the EU and the EaP countries' officials. Currently, the CSF is invited to give its input to the EaP through the Partnership's multilateral framework. The CSF participates in all four thematic platforms of the EaP, namely, (1) democracy, good governance and stability; (2) economic integration and convergence with EU policies; (3) energy security and (4) contacts between people. The inter-governmental platforms comprise the senior-level officials from the EU and the partner countries, and they meet to discuss common goals and share best practices. The representatives of the CSF are not only allowed to participate in the meetings but also have the right to give speeches and partake in the discussions. Interviews conducted with EU officials and the members of the CSF indicate that CSF members' attendance at the inter-governmental platforms and panels of the Partnership has proved valuable (Interviews, Chisinau and Brussels, October–December 2013). However, in some cases its effectiveness has been diminished because of organisational shortcomings. In a few instances, invitations by the EU officials were sent at the last minute. In other cases, some CSF members have been insufficiently well prepared to provide substantial reporting on the civil society developments to the meetings of intergovernmental platforms.

With respect to the bilateral framework of cooperation between the EU and the partner countries, the CSF is given a lesser formalised role. On the one hand, the EU increasingly consults the CSOs in the drafting of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) progress

reports. A member of one of the CSOs expressed satisfaction in this regard: “We often see that our suggestions are taken on board in the progress reports and in some cases literally” (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013). By contrast, the CSOs do not participate in the bilateral dialogue between the EU and each partner country under the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.⁷ The CSF therefore should aim to upgrade its participation in bilateral relations, asking for observer status in annual meetings of the Cooperation Council (ministerial level), the Cooperation Committee (senior civil servants) and the sub-committees (expert level) that work on issues including trade and investment, customs and cross-border cooperation, justice, freedom and security, energy, environment, networks, science and education.

The CSF is able to take part in the activities of multilateral EuroNest, through which the members of the European Parliament and the national parliaments of the EaP countries (Belarus aside) cooperate. The Forum should also aim to get involved in the bilateral Parliamentary Cooperation Committees that pair the European Parliament and each EaP partner country’s parliaments.

Many participants of the CSF recognise that a major weakness undermining the CSF’s influence on official EaP decision-making is that a majority of CSOs taking part in the Forum look first after their own interests and remain focused on their individual objectives. Most NGOs consequently do not fully appreciate the benefits of working together at the international level.

2.3 (Re)connecting and raising awareness

The CSF mirrors the major shortcoming of the wider civil society community – its detachment from society in which it functions in the EaP countries. As opposed to the EU, in the partner countries there is no tradition of strong civic participation and activism. The activities of the CSOs are not always locally born but are donor driven. Moreover, ordinary citizens of the Eastern partner countries are often unaware of the CSOs, do not understand their role and sometimes even do not value the services that these organisations provide.

Many NGOs acknowledge that, notwithstanding their familiarity with the problems their fellow citizens face, they struggle to communicate with the society at large, and their work lacks visibility. The head of one organisation voices his concern: “If we do not go to society, our work is meaningless” (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013). The need for CSOs to reconnect with society as a whole is paramount, especially for CSOs from those EaP countries where the agenda of the government radically differs from the agenda of civil society. The only way that the CSOs can force the government’s hand is if they win over the citizenry. As one of the civil society activists from a ‘difficult’ EaP country puts it: “You need an ally and your only ally is the society” (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013).

In this sense, the CSF is no exception, and the Forum should through its activities emphasise restoring the link between the CSOs and the people they intend to serve. First, although the outlying regions of the EaP countries have greater populations than the capitals, the overwhelming majority of the participant CSOs are from the capitals, as shown in the Table 1. In a few cases some of the larger CSOs from the capital work as well in the rest of the

⁷ For the countries that enter into the EU’s Association process, the Cooperation Council and the Cooperation Committee will be replaced by the Association Council and the Association Committee under the new Association Agreement.

country. Positive discrimination mechanisms could be employed to yield better representation from the regional CSOs.

Table 1. Number of CSOs participating in the Chisinau Forum from each EaP country and the EU member states (without observers)

Armenia	27	Georgia	26
- capital	21	- capital	21
- rest of country	6	- rest of country	5
Azerbaijan	26	Moldova	26
- capital	18	- capital	20
- rest of country	8	- rest of country	6
Belarus	26	Ukraine	26
- capital	23	- capital	22
- rest of country	3	- rest of country	4
EU	67		

Source: Author's compilation based on data provided by the CFS Secretariat.

Second, while preserving the capacity for advocacy through well-established CSOs is essential, sharing the Forum's stage to a greater extent with grassroots activists can bring fresh views. Compared with institutionalised CSOs, the grassroots groups have a stronger link with the citizens living in both the capitals and the regions beyond. Some initiatives are indeed born from the needs of the local communities and their experiences, and that connection is vital for the rest of the civil society field.

Third, especially in the initial stage, the CSF was composed predominantly of human rights and democracy-oriented NGOs. In this area, too, the CSF reflects the wider civil society of the EaP countries (more discussion of this takes place in the chapters to follow). Currently there is a greater variety of the CSOs working in different fields. More effort needs to be made toward including employer associations, unions and consumer organisations in the CSF.

3. Steering Committee

The Steering Committee is the governing body of the Civil Society Forum. Its 19 members are to be the coordinators of the Working Groups and National Platforms. The Forum elects two representatives from each of the five Working Groups, one from the EU and one from each Eastern Partnership country. In addition, every EaP country elects a country facilitator who becomes member of the Steering Committee. They are complemented by three elected EU coordinators. The Steering Committee has two co-chairs, one from the EU and another from one of the EaP countries. The Steering Committee is the representative body of the CSF in terms of external relations. Internally, the Committee is responsible for developing and promoting the principles and values of the CSF, keeping contacts with the members of the CSF Working Groups and sub-groups, participating in the selection of the delegates for the annual Assembly and communicating with all the stakeholders.

3.1 The role of the Steering Committee in practice

The Steering Committee meets four times a year and has the role of guiding the Forum and relaying its policy concerns to the Partnership at the inter-governmental level. A member of one of the National Platforms complained that "the National Platforms do not realise their

potential because the Steering Committee takes a lot of responsibilities on its own". He continued, "To be more effective the Steering Committee needs to involve National Platforms more in decision-making" (Interview, Chisinau, 4 October 2013). This comment comes as a surprise since the National Platform coordinators are the members of the Steering Committee who are charged with ensuring cooperation between the Platforms and the Steering Committee. In turn, a member of Steering Committee criticised some National Platforms for not formulating concrete tasks for the Steering Committee reflecting their specific needs (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013).

Moreover, the division of the labour among the civil society organisations participating in the CSF is not clear. Better coordination is needed as to what issues of the partner countries members are supposed to focus on and what part of their activities should be directed toward the EU. Such cooperation is necessary if the CSF is to use its contacts with the EU as a tool to force the EaP governments to talk to the society. The Steering Committee should take the lead in putting these two concerns together and promoting collective action.

The Steering Committee's record for advocating in Brussels and in the EU member state capitals for the Working Groups and National Platforms is not consistent. As mentioned above, three members of the Steering Committee from the EU's side have been delegated to lobby the EU officials and the member state representatives on behalf of the Forum. However, in practice, this arrangement has not always been effective. Some coordinators admit that they were not able to meet expectations. One of the former coordinators confesses: "When I was a coordinator, I did not know what I was supposed to be doing" (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013). Because of the problems encountered, the Steering Committee proposed eliminating the positions of EU coordinators at the Chisinau Assembly. However, some members of the CSF strongly opposed the move. Consequently, the Steering Committee asked for more time to revisit the proposal before presenting it to the Forum again.

A cause of disappointment at the Chisinau Forum was the process of handling the resolutions that were presented by the Steering Committee to the delegates for voting. The texts of some resolutions were distributed in last-minute fashion. One of the resolutions was even presented in pieces and not in final form. It was therefore not surprising that, according to a survey conducted by the Steering Committee, 25.05% of the respondents found the adoption of the resolutions "the least useful/interesting" (EaP CSF, 2013a) aspect of the Forum. The members of the Steering Committee realise that there has to be a better mechanism to organise the introduction and processing of resolutions. For the most recent Assembly, the Steering Committee received about 20 requests for resolutions. This is more than could be handled in the Assembly and also shows that training sessions might be needed in order to show the delegates that the resolutions are not the first option in advocating for their issues. Moreover, having too many resolutions overshadows the central messages that the CSF aims to transmit.

Another problem with the timely processing of resolutions stems from the fact that some members bring their initiatives to the attention of the Steering Committee at the last minute. Attempts to set limits and deadlines for submissions of initiatives have thus far failed. More specifically, the Steering Committee created a special group for resolutions, which was tasked with filtering the proposals. However, in the words of one Steering Committee member, the group was subject to such attack and criticism that it decided to accept most of the proposals to avoid conflict (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013). The resulting perception is that process for adoption of resolutions is unprofessional, thus harming the reputation and the effectiveness of the CSF as a whole. Therefore, the Steering Committee

should revisit the issue, setting and implementing clear criteria and deadlines for the admissibility of the resolutions and statements to be voted on in the Assembly. Another option could be to transfer this function to the Secretariat of the Steering Committee and give that body the autonomy to decide on the timing and admissibility of the resolutions.

Finally, according to current rules about one-third of the Forum participants change on a yearly basis, which creates problems in terms of stability (NGOs are allowed to participate to the CSF only two times in a row). Moreover, since the participants have to be chosen on a yearly basis, a considerable amount of time is spent on selecting NGOs, electing the Steering Committee, the Working Groups and the EU coordinators and deciding on rules of procedure, etc. The Steering Committee should consider changing the term of the CSF delegates participating in the Forum from a one- to a two-year period and use some of the time and energy devoted to selection more productively.

3.2 Secretariat

The rotation system according to which the same organisation can participate only two times in a row in the CSF has made it difficult for the Steering Committee to ensure continuity and communication in the Forum. Although there is no lack of good ideas in the Steering Committee, implementation of those ideas has lagged. Administrative support for the Steering Committee has been a subject of protracted discussions. Some members argued the need for a Secretariat to assist the Steering Committee in order for the latter to be effective. Others feared that the Secretariat in due time could overshadow the Steering Committee by making proposals that would be passed without in-depth scrutiny by the Steering Committee, whose elected delegates are not full-time staff members like those of the appointed Secretariat. A compromise was found to set up a Secretariat that supports the Steering Committee on the administrative, organisational and technical tasks but cannot intervene in decision-making.

The establishment of the Steering Committee Secretariat (EaP CSF, 2012) at the beginning of 2013 marks an important step in the institutionalisation of the CSF. It provides daily support to the work of the Steering Committee and the annual Assembly. In its one year of existence thus far, the Secretariat has served as the CSF's hub of coordination, information sharing and institutional memory. The Secretariat has also become contact point for relations with EU institutions such as the European Commission, the EEAS and the European Economic and Social Committee. As opposed to the Steering Committee, which meets only four times a year, the Secretariat works on a permanent basis.

The Secretariat currently has two staff members, a director and a communications manager, to conduct the whole host of support activities. Some members see advantage in creating a specialist officer position in the Secretariat permanently advocating for the CSF. However, others presuppose that, as a result of such an appointment, the Steering Committee members might lose the opportunity to lobby the European institutions themselves. The Secretariat is given an enormous amount of work (logistics, organisational and administrative arrangements to facilitate different meetings, etc.) but very little in the way of resources (two staff members) to perform these tasks. Not only is there a need for an advocacy officer in the Secretariat but also for an administrative worker to support the coordinators of the Working Groups (more on this subject in Chapter 5).

The budget of the Secretariat for 2013 amounted to €313,000 (EaP CSF, 2013b). €250,000 originated from the European Commission's Civil Society Facility, and the rest came from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). One-fourth of the budget, however,

was spent on Steering Committee meetings. The main operational problem stems from the fact that the Secretariat is funded only for a period of one year. Such an arrangement is not sustainable, and fund-raising requires time and resources that the Secretariat currently lacks.

In its short existence, the Secretariat has managed to prove its mettle, winning the support of many leaders of the CSF. In order for it to be effective in assisting the work of the Forum, it should have sustainable mid-term operational funding, as well as the backing of the members of the Steering Committee toward becoming a real executive body of the CSF that not only provides administrative, technical and logistical support but also leads in strategic matters of the Forum.

4. Working Groups: From meeting to working

The Civil Society Forum is composed of five thematic Working Groups: 1) democracy, human rights, good governance and stability; 2) economic integration and convergence with EU policies; 3) environment, climate change and energy security; 4) contacts between people and 5) social and labour policies and social dialogue. The CSF Working Groups largely mirror the inter-governmental platforms of the Eastern Partnership multilateral framework with the exception of Working Group 5. In theory, each Working Group should have two coordinators, one originating from the EU and the other from the EaP civil society organisations. The members of the Working Groups meet at least twice a year, once during the yearly Assembly and the second time in a Working Group meeting.

Although the Working Groups meet within the Forum as a whole, their other, dedicated Working Group meetings can take place in sub-groups rather than in the plenary Working Group. This will give the sub-groups an opportunity to advocate. These meetings should be better timed, geared toward convening for example before the Council of the EU schedules meetings of its foreign, interior, economy or education ministers. This will make the work of the CSF more visible and recognised by the EU partners.

The format of meeting in the Working Groups makes the substantive work of the CSF manageable. The members of the Forum choose to join the Working Group that is closest to their field of interest. By entering a Working Group, the CSOs commit working together the whole year. However, a limited number of organisations are active throughout the year. The interviewed participants of the Forum pointed to a number of reasons for the relative idleness of the majority of the CSOs. First, the NGOs that participate in the Working Groups are primarily accountable to their donors and view participation in the work of the CSF as supplementary. Second, there are very few projects (e.g., monitoring of the Roadmap to the Eastern Partnership's Vilnius Summit, the EaP index, the visa index) suitable for joint action in or across the Working Groups. Third, some NGOs come to the Forum because they want to be seen, network and search for funding and not to make a commitment to work together for at least the next 12 months.

The coordinators have a central role in making the Working Groups functional. Some of the coordinators are more active in trying to engage the members of their Working Groups than others. A number of the Working Group coordinators admit that they are struggling to involve the CSOs. It is not realistic to expect that all member organisations of a given Working Group will be active. Therefore, the coordinators have to aim and form a core group of dynamic NGOs in each Working Group. One of the coordinators notes, "If the coordinator works, then it would be possible to find many working allies in the group. It would not be possible to make everyone work but there will be a core team" (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013).

Since the members of the Working Groups meet each other in person only two times per year, keeping communication lines open is essential for their effectiveness. One of the ex-coordinators shares his experience: “To be successful in the Working Groups means to be persistent and understand that one call is not enough to make a person motivated” (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013). Interviews with members of the CSF indicate that communication functions better in some Working Groups than in others. Having an active coordinator, however, does not guarantee effective communication. A former Working Group coordinator recalls that he sent emails on a particular issue to 300–400 people but less than 5% replied (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013).

Aside from Belarus, the National Platforms of the Forum have their own Working Groups mirroring those of the CSF. Therefore, in theory, the institutional structure allows for direct communication between the Working Groups at the national level and the Forum’s Working Groups. Thanks to this parallel structure, the burden of coordination and communication ought not to rest solely on the shoulders of the Forum Working Groups’ coordinators. However, in practice, the communication and the teamwork is far from what it could be here, too. One of the coordinators laments: “In a year that I have been Working Group coordinator, I have had one or two messages from the Working Group coordinators at the national level. There is almost no coordination.... The apathy is the problem” (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013).

Encouraging a large number of NGOs to work in concert is not an easy task indeed. One of the coordinators observes that he has many ideas, and in principle the members of the Working Group are supportive. However, he does not have time to search for resources, draft the resolutions and manage the discussions (Interview, Chisinau, 4 October 2013). One option to tackle the issue could be attaching a technical staff member to the Working Groups who would be in charge of the organisational issues, internal and external communication and looking for funding for projects that could jointly be implemented by the members of the Working Groups. With its current resources, the Secretariat of the Steering Committee (see Chapter 4) cannot handle the additional workload. Therefore, an extra position could be designated to facilitate the effective functioning of the Working Groups.

Because coordinators remain in their role for only a short time, the continuity of the Working Groups and sub-groups is often interrupted. Therefore, each group or sub-group should set its long-term priorities to counter the negative effects that arise from the frequent change in coordinators.

Despite the on-going problems, the Working Groups have largely proved their value, especially in their role as an impartial watchdog. In a number of areas the CSOs need more capacity-building support in order better to understand the issues and therefore to be able to conduct effective monitoring. The Working Groups must push for the stable EU funding mechanisms to allow them to keep track of the implementation of the commitments made by the governments of the EaP countries. However, the Working Groups should be able to work together, which is rarely the case currently, even when there is no specific funding.

4.1 Working Group 1 on democracy, human rights, good governance and stability

Working Group 1 has consistently been the largest of the five, accounting for more than half of the Forum. During the most recent CSF in Chisinau, Working Group 1 constituted about 43% of the Forum (see Table 2). In essence, the Working Group focuses on the integration of the Eastern partners into the EU’s sphere through the development of sustainable democratic

structures. To this end, it offers contributions from civil society in the areas of electoral processes, human rights, freedom of media, the fight against corruption, and helping local authorities function.

Table 2. Number of CSOs registered for Working Group 1 at Chisinau

Total number	94	Azerbaijan	8
Romania	3	Poland	5
France	2	Georgia	10
Ukraine	9	Hungary	1
Belgium	8	Latvia	1
Belarus	11	Lithuania	1
Moldova	12	Germany	3
Armenia	9	Czech Republic	5
Sweden	1	Finland	1
Spain	1	UK	1
Slovakia	2		

Source: Author's compilation based on data provided by the CFS Secretariat.

In order to facilitate the substantive work of the large Group 1, it has been divided into seven sub-groups. The *Public Administration Reform* sub-group's objectives include advocacy aiming to decrease the administrative burdens on taxpayers, inclusion of civil society in the process of decision-shaping for the National Strategies for Local Self-Government and public administration reform in consultation with civil society organisations. The *Fight against Corruption* sub-group focuses on monitoring the state of corruption in the EaP countries and contributing to the fight against malfeasance by NGOs from the EU and the EaP taking initiatives jointly. The *Judiciary Reform* sub-group works toward a set of common goals for the courts system and law enforcement. Its recommendations include calling for greater transparency of the EU funding allocated for justice sector reforms and working toward the creation of a specific mechanism for civil society engagement in improving the judiciary through monitoring from planning to implementation.

Acknowledging the problems stemming from the lack of transparency in visa negotiations conducted between the EU and the EaP countries, the *Visa Facilitation* sub-group monitors the process of this dialogue and advocates for visa liberalisation as a potential success story of the EaP. The *Media* sub-group works on recommendations related to bringing the EaP countries' media legislation up to the EU's standards and invites journalists from the countries in focus to cover the activities of the Forum. In addition, it monitors public broadcasting in the EaP countries, including the possible monopolising of media through the process of digitalisation of TV broadcasters or through restricting the activities of local TV broadcasters. The *Human Rights* sub-group advocates for rights issues to be on the agenda of inter-governmental meetings. It also monitors whether the state-of-play of human rights in the EaP countries corresponds to their governments' commitments. Finally, the *Election Monitoring* sub-group, which is one of the CSF's flagship initiatives, focuses on observing the conduct of elections and campaigns in the EaP countries. All these activities are coordinated with the respective National Platforms of the CSF.

A number of sub-groups contain very few participants, which prevents them from accomplishing much. One of CSF participants expressed discontent because she preferred to be involved in two interrelated sub-groups; however, because of the set-up, that was not possible (Interview, Chisinau, 4 October 2013). It is advisable to restructure Working Group 1, splitting its members into two large sub-groups focusing on the good governance on the one hand and human rights and democracy on the other.

The Steering Committee's has made an effort to draw the CSOs away from Working Group 1. However, this should not be taken to an extreme. In the EaP countries, the most active and successful organisations are those that work on the democratic institutions, human rights and corruption, which remain of central concern. This is reflected as well in the CSF and leads naturally to a preponderance of representatives in Working Group 1.

4.2 Working Group 2 on economic integration and convergence with EU policies

Working Group 2 (see Table 3) primarily focuses on the economic integration of EaP countries with the EU through the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs). The Working Group also encourages those Eastern Partners that are not participating in the World Trade Organization to become members. The Working Group deals with specific issues such as enhancing social security, eradication of poverty, sustainable development and climate change. It also aims to assist consumer organisations, enhance business contacts, construct a better regulatory framework and raise quality standards in the EaP countries. Within this Working Group, there are seven sub-groups: environment and climate change; small and medium-sized enterprises policy; agriculture and rural development; transport; trade and trade-regulated cooperation linked to Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs); territorial, regional and cross-border cooperation; and integration of the information and communication technology infrastructure of the EU.

Table 3. Number of CSOs registered for Working Group 2 at Chisinau

Total number	35	Belarus	2
Poland	2	Sweden	2
Slovakia	1	Armenia	3
Ukraine	3	UK	1
Georgia	9	Romania	2
Moldova	4	Azerbaijan	6

Source: Author's compilation based on data provided by the CSF Secretariat.

Working Group 2 unites think tanks on the one hand and NGOs. The idea is to be able to produce substantive policy reports and advocate for them so that they are heeded by the various stakeholders. More specifically, the Working Group aims to develop its own index of European economic integration similar to the indexes already employed by the more active components of the CSF. However, capacity building is needed not only to improve the ability of the EaP countries' delegates to draft policy papers, developing and applying common methodology and principles, but also for the purpose of conducting lobbying based on the findings of the index.

Finally, Working Group 2 struggles to function cohesively and find common topics to focus on since the EaP countries are in different stages of economic integration with the EU. Some countries are on course to sign the DCFTA with the EU. Others do not have such ambitions or lack the ability to follow such a path.

4.3 Working Group 3 on environment, climate change and energy

Working Group 3 deals with energy security and the environment. Transferring the EU's know-how to the Eastern Partners is the mission of the group. The areas in focus include aiding the EaP countries in integrating environmental standards into their national policies, promoting energy efficiency, combating climate change and working toward diversification of the energy supply. The three thematic sub-groups are energy security, climate change, and environmental protection.

Table 4. Number of CSOs registered for Working Group 3 at Chisinau

Total number	37	Sweden	2
Czech Republic	1	Moldova	6
Georgia	4	Transnistria (Moldova)	1
Azerbaijan	5	Hungary	1
Ukraine	6	Estonia	1
Armenia	6	France	1
Belarus	3		

Source: Author's compilation based on data provided by the CSF Secretariat.

As opposed to the EaP inter-governmental platforms, where energy issues are dealt with in Platform 3 and the environment in Platform 2, the CSOs working on energy and the environment meet in a single Working Group. One of the environmentalist members of the Working Group argues that the system adopted by the CSF is better since "the climate change and energy cannot be divided in two different topics. Climate change is based on the energy policy" (Interview, Chisinau, 4 October 2013). However, in practice, the group has functional problems, and there are tensions between the sub-groups. Having diverging priorities, the environmentalists and energy security specialists often do not manage to cooperate successfully. One of the environmentalists shares his feelings: "In normal life we are enemies unless it [the subject] is about renewable energy" (Interview, Chisinau, 4 October 2013). From the other side, a member of the Working Group involved in the energy security complains that it is not possible to discuss issues such as atomic energy with the members of the environment sub-group present. Some members of the Working Group suggest splitting it up. However, a more reasonable solution is for energy and environment advocates to try to collaborate when possible and learn to disagree and work separately on their own briefs (energy or environment) where cooperation is not an option.

4.4 Working Group 4 on contacts between people

Working Group 4 deals with issues such as visa dialogue, education, youth and culture. The group's goals include dissemination of the information and opportunities provided by the EU, promoting cooperation between the EU and EaP CSOs and fostering understanding of shared values. It works on the visa dialogue by advocating for simplified visa procedures, pushes for increased funding for internships, volunteer work and exchange programmes and encourages youth engagement in attaining the goals of the EaP. The Working Group includes three sub-groups specialising in culture, education and youth.

Table 5. Number of CSOs registered for Working Group 4 at Chisinau

Total number	38	Poland	3
Armenia	4	Bulgaria	1
Azerbaijan	3	Belgium	1
Belarus	9	Germany	2
Moldova	3	Czech Republic	1
Georgia	5	Netherlands	1
Romania	1	Ukraine	4

Source: Author's compilation based on data provided by the CSF Secretariat.

Before the CSF in Chisinau, Working Group 4 prepared the Eastern Partnership Youth Forum side event. The sub-group on culture is developing a strategy for cooperation in the field of culture. The sub-group on education is implementing a regional project. However, there are concerns that the Working Group does not live up to its potential (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013). Moreover, the Working Group lacks an overarching strategy, and communication between the coordinators at the Forum and national levels is problematic.

4.5 Working Group 5 on social and labour policies and social dialogue

Working Group 5 is the latecomer, established only at the fourth CSF in Stockholm in November 2012. This is the only Working Group that is not modelled after any of the EaP multilateral platforms. The priorities of the group include social dialogue, labour migration, informal employment and multinational enterprises, as well as social rights.

Table 6. Number of CSOs registered for Working Group 5 at Chisinau

Total number	29	Cyprus	1
Lithuania	2	Poland	1
Belarus	3	Georgia	1
Moldova	3	Czech Republic	1
Azerbaijan	4	Belgium	1
Armenia	6	UK	1
Bulgaria	1	Ukraine	4

Source: Author's compilation based on data provided by the CSF Secretariat.

At the Chisinau Forum, the Working Group had its first meeting during the annual Assembly. The meeting revealed that the profile of the groups is unclear. There were divisions and tensions between the members of unions and employers' organisations supported by European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), on the one hand, and CSOs working on social rights. Working Group 5 was established as a result of lobbying by the EESC to facilitate social dialogue between the unions, employers and governments, including the local authorities. Although interrelated, the goals of the tripartite dialogue (unions, employers and governments) and the social rights NGOs (e.g., those working on poverty, social protection, the rights of children and of people with disabilities) differ substantively. The CSOs that are working for social rights but not specifically on the tripartite dialogue complain that in the current set-up of the Working Group they are struggling to have their voices heard.

As a result of the dissension between the two factions, only one coordinator from the EU for Working Group 5 was elected. The issues were referred to the Steering Committee for further deliberation. The elected coordinator should engage the Steering Committee in the process of finding a balanced solution. Despite the differences in focus, the two major blocks of Working Group 5 can in fact function well together. Fashioning a more inclusive profile for the group would help to create a collaborative atmosphere, and the energy of the participants could be directed toward achieving tangible results rather than being wasted in conflict.

4.6 Linking the Working Groups

There is very little cross-Working Group collaboration in the CSF, and cooperation between the members of different groups at the level of the Forum is limited. One of the participants of the CSF in Chisinau muses: “There are some walls between the working groups’ activity, and I do not know why” (Interview, Chisinau, 4 October 2013). Besides the socialisation during the annual Assembly, the Working Groups cooperate mainly when there is a common project that cuts across sectors and needs to be implemented by more than one group (e.g., a number of the indexes and the Roadmap on the implementation of commitments under the EaP). Although the projects undertaken in the framework of the CSF are limited in the number, they bring an important added dimension. As opposed to established international indexes produced by institutions such as the Freedom House, Transparency International or the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Foundation), the benchmarks of studies produced by the CSF are based on the commitments taken by the partner countries’ governments in the framework of the EaP.

The quality of the studies produced by members of the CSF varies. There is a need to work toward a shared methodology and framework in order to keep the CSF brand from being diluted. The Steering Committee established a sub-group for monitoring. However, the sub-group never managed to get off the ground. As it stands, any two or three member civil society organisations can join together and conduct monitoring on behalf of the CSF without any proper process or quality control. There are examples of some low-calibre studies that are published with the imprimatur of the CSF.

Cooperation between the Working Groups should be improved. There are many cross-disciplinary areas where the groups can and should join forces, such as economic development (Working Group 2) and environment (Working Group 3); human rights (Working Group 1) and education (Working Group 4); use and preservation of the land (Working Groups 1, 2 and 3) and social rights (Working Group 5), within the framework of convergence with EU policies (Working Group 2).

Working together through conducting studies or joint implementation of projects is certainly helpful in the effort to unite the forces of CSOs included in different Working Groups of the CSF. However, collaboration between the groups should not be limited to the joint implementation of various projects. Otherwise, the CSF runs the risk of turning from a forum of civic activism into a multinational consortium of consultancies.

5. National Platforms

The National Platforms, which are at the heart of the Civil Society Forum, have been established in all Eastern Partnership countries in order to institutionalise the contribution of the local civil society in achieving the goals of the EaP for their states. To this end, the

National Platforms are also a tool to facilitate a dialogue between the civic service organisations in each EaP country, their respective governments and the EU institutions involved. The technical issues such as the format, selection procedures and decision-making rules are left to be developed by the individual National Platform. The members of each Platform elect a country facilitator, who is responsible for coordinating the work of the Platform and representing it in the Steering Committee. With exception of Belarus (discussed in more detail below), the National Platforms have established their own Working Groups reflecting those of the Forum.

Meeting under the umbrella of the larger Forum, with more than 200 NGOs from the EU and partner countries, is not always conducive to making heard voices on important national issues that do not resonate with the EaP as a whole. Therefore, the National Platforms are especially valuable since they direct attention to the peculiarities of individual EaP countries and work on these issues at the national and local levels. Compared with those of the Forum, cooperation between the Working Groups at the national level is more intensive, in good part because there are almost a dozen meetings a year in the National Platforms, as opposed to the two held at the CSF level. Having the National Platforms articulate their specific concerns is also helpful for advocacy purposes.

To a varying degree, the National Platforms have issues with visibility and gaining acceptance. To raise their profile, the National Platforms could benefit from holding a large annual event similar in format to the CSF annual Assembly. There they could present the work they did throughout the year, inviting representatives of other National Platforms as well as high-level officials from the EU and their own national governments to participate.

Acceptance of the National Platforms by governments differs across the six EaP countries. Whereas there is some room for Moldovan and Georgian CSOs to give input to their national governments, this is less apparent in the cases of Armenia and Ukraine, and officials in Azerbaijan and Belarus are not at all cooperative. In general terms, the National Platforms are given more recognition by EU officials than by the EaP governments. Capitalising on EU support for the purpose of increasing leverage in their relations with their home authorities is more feasible for those CSOs whose governments are more inclined toward European integration.

The National Platforms also vary considerably in terms of their number of members (more on this below) and capacity. With a budget of €1,016,690, the EU funds project “Strengthening Capacities of the National Platforms of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum” focuses on capacity building, fostering active social dialogue and monitoring of the implementation of commitments undertaken by partner country governments under the EaP. The regional component of the project aims to create links between the National Platforms through collaboration in areas such as media independence, policy dialogue and raising awareness. Beyond the EU-funded project, the National Platforms themselves ought to join forces and collaborate closely in the areas where there are common concerns. An obvious example is the judiciary, which is far from being independent and professional in any EaP country.

The Armenian National Platform was the first of the Platforms, established in June 2010. It is currently composed of 188 CSOs that are involved in the Working Groups of the CSF. The Armenian Platform has had a difficult road over the past four years. In the beginning, it was fragmented, and infighting absorbed a lot of energy and time that could have been used for more constructive matters. Currently, the Platform functions as a cohesive body, by and large.

The Platform has also spent considerable amount of time on its own organisation and communication tools. Its institutionalisation was completed with the establishment of its Secretariat, which thus far lacks an operating budget. Currently the Platform's constituent parts are up and running, and there are frequent meetings and seminars in its Working Groups. Having set up its operations, the Platform now needs to channel its efforts toward more substantive work, particularly in light of President Serzh Sargsyan's decision to join a Russia-led customs union, which has adversely affected Armenia's integration with Europe, including the work of the National Platform.

The National Platform of Azerbaijan contains 51 CSOs. The Platform is active in voicing concerns related to elections, human rights and especially political prisoners in the country. Since there is little desire on the part of the Azeri authorities to pursue European integration, the National Platform finds it difficult to collaborate with either the government or the business community.

Moreover, the Platform and its active members often become targets of harassment and sometimes even imprisonment by the authorities. The Platform also faces difficulties in receiving permission from the government to organise public meetings. They are denied access to the television channels through which they could raise public awareness about European integration. The CSOs involved in the Platform would like to see EU-Azerbaijan cooperation extended beyond energy cooperation, to the areas of human rights and democracy in particular. As for the needs of the Platform itself, the members are seeking institutional support to set up a Secretariat for running day-to-day operations. In addition, the Azerbaijan Platform would benefit from more extensive capacity building.

The Belarusian National Platform consists of 65 CSOs and does not follow the format having institutions to parallel the CSF's Working Groups. Instead, it has formed a Coordinative Council consisting of seven members that guides the work of the Platform. Not everyone in the Forum is convinced that having a different format has been beneficial. According to one of the leaders of the CSF from an EU NGO, proposals to adjust the Belarusian National Platform to match the way the CSF is structured are consistently rejected, and "no one understands how the Belarusian Platform works" (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013).

Although the limited participation of Belarus in the inter-governmental EaP detracts from the efficacy of the Belarusian National Platform, Belarusian CSOs are actively engaged in the Forum. One of the members of the Platform states:

For a country like Belarus, relations of civil society with the government are very difficult and we have no place in dialogue with the government. We need to increase our voice and the Forum gives us that space. Other countries have something. We have nothing. [President Aleksandr] Lukashenko does not want any progress in relations with Europe. (Interview, Chisinau, 4 October 2013)

A group of the National Platform member NGOs under the leadership of a consortium called 'EuroBelarus' drafted a strategy that was seen by some CSOs as an effort to hijack the National Platform. A number of NGOs had substantive disagreements with the draft strategy. However, they were not able to get their points through since the process of decision-making was not inclusive. One of the members of the National Platform recalls that "disagreement turned into a scandal and demoralised people involved in the Platform. Even Commissioner Štefan Füle in [the] Stockholm CSF called on the members of the Platform to resolve the differences" (Interview, Chisinau, 4 October 2013).

Consequently, some of the important civil society organisations are pondering whether to leave or indeed have already left the Belarusian National Platform. The Platform undoubtedly is in need of a reset. It should start a more inclusive process to resolve the strategy-related differences between its members. It also needs to take under serious consideration adjusting its structure to the Working Group format so as to harmonise with the CSF as a whole.

The Georgian National Platform, established in 2010, adopted an open-door policy and has welcomed all the interested CSOs to join the Platform if they take responsibility to work on Georgia's political, economic and social integration into the EU. The platform currently has 103 members,⁸ and its Secretariat was inaugurated at the beginning of 2013. Members of the Georgian National Platform work with the Georgian government and EU Delegation in Tbilisi. The CSOs are invited to offer their input, especially to the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see more above). The Georgian CSOs involved in the Platform are critical of their government's handling of minority rights. The Platform is fairly united on the issues of European integration and Georgian-Russian relations vis-à-vis the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, there are differences of opinion elsewhere, especially regarding the country's economic development.

Moldova's National Platform was established in March 2011, has 40 members⁹ and is open to all CSOs that have been active for at least two years. Before the establishment of the Moldovan National Platform of the CSF, there were already a number of assemblages of Moldovan CSOs. The National Participatory Council was created on the initiative of the government of Moldova. There is also a National NGO Council and a few other formal gatherings of CSOs focusing on different policy fields such as environmental and social issues. Despite the existence of these forums, a consensus was reached that the CSF National Platform will be beneficial since it will work specifically on the issues related to European integration.

Similar to the Georgian case, the Moldovan National Platform is critically engaged with the country's authorities, and the CSOs take part in many governmental meetings. One of the Platform members notes: "The support of the Ministry of European Affairs of Moldova was very important. At least in the first years they attended all our meetings. They shared with us what they are doing in the discussion and negotiations for the Association Agreement and the DCFTA" (Interview, Chisinau, 4 October 2013).

A large number of Moldovan NGOs are not yet convinced of the Platform's worth, resulting in attenuated participation rates. Only about 25 NGOs are active members. The Platform needs to widen its base, attracting CSOs not only from the capital but also from the regions beyond it. One of its members observes: "In the Chisinau, 80% of the population [has] heard about the Eastern Partnership. But the majority of the population in the regions does not know about the Eastern Partnership" (Interview, Chisinau, 4 October 2013).

The Ukraine National Platform was founded in January 2011 and structures its activities around the themes of the Working Groups and the sub-groups of the CSF. The coordinators of the Platform, Working Groups and sub-groups are responsible for keeping in contact with

⁸ No CSOs from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which have effectively broken away from Georgia with Russian help, participated in the Chisinau CSF.

⁹ Only one CSO from the Russian-sponsored breakaway region of Transnistria participated in the Chisinau CSF with full voting rights.

their counterparts at the Forum level. Only in cases when relations between the Working Groups' coordinators run into problems does the national coordinator come into play.

The Platform has 188 registered members. In contrast to Georgia and Moldova, the Ukrainian government is not eager to involve the CSOs in policy shaping, especially in areas that it considers politically sensitive. In recent years, the main focus of the Ukrainian National Platform has been the mooted EU Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. The Platform members have worked at the political level, aiming to resolve potential obstacles to signing the Association Agreement. Moreover, the Platform is also engaged in public awareness campaigns, explaining the substance of the agreement to the populace. The Platform members are naturally disappointed in President Viktor Yanukovich's decision not to sign the Association Agreement, including the DCFTA, with the EU at the EaP's Vilnius Summit in November 2013, and some CSOs have been active in the "EuroMaidan" anti-government protests in Kiev's central Maidan Square.

EU Platform? The CSF has struggled to engage CSOs from the EU. There have been concerns that the European stakeholders might lose interest in joining the Forum and that the CSF might run the risk of becoming solely the Forum of the Eastern partners, breaking its link to European Union civil society. Often the members of the Forum and particularly those of the Steering Committee have had to use their personal contacts to encourage EU NGOs to apply and participate in the CSF. Sixty-seven NGOs from the EU member states participated in the most recent CSF in Chisinau (see Table 7), which amounts to about 30% of Forum (see Table 1). In practice, therefore, the organisers of the CSF in Chisinau managed to attract a substantial number of European NGOs. Moreover, the elections of Steering Committee members from the EU side were reasonably competitive, as opposed to the elections held a year ago in Stockholm, where some of the positions were not even contested. However, Table 7 shows that the majority of the NGOs from the EU originate in the Central and Eastern European member states, along with Sweden. (Belgium is an exception since it is the host of the major European institutions.)

Table 7. EU NGOs participating in the Working Group meetings in Chisinau

Total number	67		
Belgium	10	Hungary	2
Bulgaria	2	Netherlands	1
Czech Republic	8	Latvia	1
Cyprus	1	Lithuania	3
Estonia	1	Poland	11
France	3	Slovakia	3
Germany	5	Sweden	5
UK	3	Romania	6
Finland	1	Spain	1

Source: Author's compilation based on data provided by the CSF Secretariat.

To improve the position of the EU NGOs, some members of the CSF propose to establish a separate EU Platform similar to those of the Eastern partners. However, many members remain unconvinced. An EU CSO member voices his opposition:

I find the meetings only between the EU NGOs counter-productive. They can talk one to one if they want to. The reason you want the EU people here [is] because they are working on the projects together or supporting mutually project partners from the partner countries. Why create a platform where the EU people will talk to themselves? [It

is hard to imagine why] the EU NGOs [would] come to the Eastern Partnership meeting and meet with each other without the Eastern Partner countries. (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013)

During the Chisinau Forum, the Steering Committee proposed to eliminate the positions of the EU coordinators. As a member of the Steering Committee explains, the move was motivated by a desire to make the Steering Committee less unwieldy by cutting down on its membership without minimising the role of the EU NGOs: “Even if you scrub these 3 positions you will still have 5 people from the EU.... Fewer but more committed people in the Steering Committee, [working] more effectively” (Interview, Chisinau, 5 October 2013). However, because of protests during the Forum by some of the CSOs against eliminating the EU coordinators, the CSF postponed putting the proposal to a vote, asking for more time for amendments.

Despite the success of the Chisinau CSF in attracting substantial participation by EU CSO members, there are issues with election procedures that need to be addressed with a view to making the EU CSOs’ participation sustainable. One member of the Forum from an EU CSO points out the absence of clear criteria for selection of the EU CSOs (Interview, Brussels, 17 December 2013). Moreover, all National Platforms of the Eastern neighbourhood countries decide on their leadership and thus whom they send to the Steering Committee. However, both the EU and the EaP CSOs together decide who will be elected from the EU CSOs to be the three EU coordinators and the co-chairs of the Working Groups, and this in a setting where the representatives of the Eastern partner countries greatly outnumber those of the EU. Hence, an EU CSO representative argues that such a set-up creates problems with regard to accountability and makes a case for the EU CSOs to elect their representatives in the Steering Committee (Interview, Brussels, 17 December 2013)

The participation and membership issues surrounding the CSOs from the EU countries also urgently need to be clarified. For example, if an NGO from an Eastern neighbourhood country is selected to participate in the CSF once, it automatically becomes a member of its National Platform. Even if that NGO is not selected the subsequent time or has to step back (because the rules do not allow it to participate in the Forum more than two consecutive times), it can still participate in the work of the CSF through the National Platform. However, the EU CSOs are selected to be part of the Forum only, and if they are not chosen the next time around, they are effectively out of the process. A possible solution to this problem could be to give EU CSOs the status of ‘permanent’ membership of the Forum once they are selected (Interview, Brussels, 17 December 2013). Even if they are not selected for the subsequent CSF, then they can still participate in the Forum as self-funded members without voting rights. The latter could be reserved only for those EU CSOs that are chosen to participate in the upcoming Forum.

The rotation rule that any organisation can participate only in two Forums in a row might also need to be relaxed for the EU CSOs. Moreover, the CSF should put more effort into engaging CSOs from the Western European member states, from many of which the Forum does not receive applications. (The Secretariat of the Steering Committee also has an important role in networking and disseminating information about the Forum to CSOs from the EU.) However, realistically, one should not expect that the level of interest from Western European countries’ CSOs in participating in the Forum will approach that of Sweden or the Central and Eastern member states.

6. Conclusions

Over the four-plus years of its existence the Civil Society Forum has held five yearly Assemblies. The Forum's biggest achievement to date is the development of an impressive institutional architecture and the fostering of extensive socialisation among its members. The Forum has built a network of NGOs organised in the National Platforms and the Working Groups (and their sub-groups) at both the Forum and national levels (except in Belarus). Institutionalisation of the CSF has taken a considerable amount of time and energy, which often forced the Forum members to engage in a long process of navel-gazing. The CSF has a chance to make the newly created Secretariat of the Steering Committee a real executive arm of the Forum that can focus on achieving genuine policy results with respect to external relations. However, a number of members of the Steering Committee insist on limiting the mandate of the Secretariat to purely administrative tasks.

The CSF's success in terms of policy issues remains modest. It successfully advocated for the launching of the Civil Society Facility. The National Platforms and the Steering Committee contributed to the drafting of the Roadmap to the Eastern Partnership's Vilnius Summit. The Steering Committee also lobbied for the European Parliament to send an observation mission to the presidential elections in Azerbaijan in 2013. The Georgian National Platform played a key role in the conceptualisation of the "European Integration Communication and Information Strategy of Georgia" (2014–17) in cooperation with Georgia's State Ministry for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration.

A major challenge facing the CSF is turning the Forum from a one-off yearly event into an on-going instrumentality working toward the European integration of the Eastern partners. The civil society organisations are selected according to their ability and willingness to contribute to the National Platforms and the Working Groups. Although it is not realistic to expect all the CSOs to work actively throughout a year, at least a core group of active NGOs is essential. The leaders of the Forum must coordinate and encourage the CSOs to collaborate with each other as well as show the way through their own example. The continuity of the undertakings of the Working Groups and sub-groups can be ensured through setting long-term priorities to counter the adverse effects that arise from the frequent change of the coordinators.

Another challenge for the CSF is to maintain its unity. Georgia and Moldova are on track to signing Association Agreements and the DCFTA. Armenia and Ukraine cancelled their efforts toward signing an Association Agreement; the Armenian president even expressed his intention to join a Russia-led Customs Union instead. Azerbaijan and Belarus have largely remained outside of the Association process and uninterested in the Eastern Partnership. With such fragmentation, the civil society groups of the various Eastern Partnership countries will naturally have less common challenges to work on together. Some members of the CSF whose countries have stayed outside of the Association process fear that after the Vilnius Summit the EU might spend even less time working with them.

Although some of the members of the international civic networks participating in the Chisinau CSF expressed concerns, particularly about the organisational issues, more and more international NGOs participate in the Forum, which points to the fact that it is gaining traction beyond the immediate neighbourhood. The international networks use the CSF as a transmission belt for issues of special concern to them. While keeping its primary goal that of encouraging European integration, the CSF should make more effort to engage existing civic networks, whose activities overlap with those of the Forum. To that end, the selection criteria and membership rules for CSOs from the EU member states need to be reconceived.

The EU institutions, as a stakeholder in the CSF, provide it both political and financial support. The National Platforms are the entry point for EU institutions and the EU Delegations to conduct consultations with civil society, although they are not the only groupings of CSOs that the EU consults. There is an expectation within the EU that the CSF will be able to conduct monitoring of the commitments made by the Eastern partner governments and will produce joint reports on the implementation of the reforms, raise public awareness about the benefits of the European integration and influence official decision-making on such matters.

Although there are high expectations of the CSF, there is also a realisation that civil society in the Eastern neighbourhood countries remains weak. The EU's funding of activities such as capacity building for the CSOs is useful. However, it is not effective if offered on a stand-alone basis. The EU should consider supporting the capacity-building initiatives that are built into projects that have thematic policy objectives.

To a limited extent, the Georgian and Moldovan governments welcome CSOs into the decision-shaping processes when it comes to those countries' European integration. The other Eastern Partnership countries' governments, in varying degrees, are not sympathetic to the idea of involving their civil society organisations in deliberations over governance and external affairs. There is a general perception within the NGOs participating in the CSF that the authorities of the Eastern partner countries are 'immune' to the pressure of a civil society that remains largely weak. Therefore, the CSOs engaged in the CSF have not managed to make a substantial impact on the European integration and reform processes.

Most of the CSOs that take part in the Forum need to adopt a view of the CSF as a collective entity that seeks to realise common interests while remaining accountable, open and transparent. The members of NGOs involved in the CSF on the level of the Working Groups or the National Platforms should not limit their cooperation just to instances when there is a joint project to pursue. After all, civil society activism is based on the well-being of the people and not only on where there is funding available. This principle is central in the effort to restore the link between the civil society organisations and the broader societies they serve.

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