

A Brief Introduction

The development of Civil Society sector in post-Soviet countries began right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Hundreds of organizations were established due to large funds, grants and donations from donor organizations that were interested in building democracy in the post-communist states. This phenomenon is often called as “mushrooming of NGOs” or “NGO-ization of Civil Society”.

Armenia has a long tradition and history of Civil Society keeping in mind the Ancient and Medieval understandings of Civil Society as the communal life and human associations, interest groups outside of the state existed here for centuries. However, if we use the modern understanding of Civil Society developed and conceptualized mainly by the Western academics, the Armenian Civil Society is only 25 years old. In this article I use the modern understanding of Civil Society that is *a realm of autonomous and independent non-governmental organizations, movements, networks, grassroots associations, social enterprises, in other words any value, need and interest based social groups established voluntarily by people who through collective action try to fulfil certain goals that bring benefits for a particular group of the society or to the society as a whole. Following this logic, the development of modern Civil Society in Armenia traces back to late 1980s and the beginning of 1990s.*

Most of the NGOs and movements formed back then were mostly connected to the environmental causes. Those environmental movements, inspired by Gorbachev’s reforms and partial tolerance of the Kremlin towards environmental activism, could be observed in Armenia, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine.

In general the development of modern Armenian third sector was influenced by several considerable historical factors, such as the inheritance of the Soviet era and its collapse, the 1988 earthquake and the following flow of humanitarian assistance, armed conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh and growing interest of development organizations, Armenian diaspora and other donors in Armenia.

Since 1990, the raising donor support directed to the development of non-profit organizations has played an important role in the progress of the current Civil Society and shaped the Armenian Civil Society. Except foreign donors, International aid and humanitarian organizations, the European Union and other donors, it is important to mention that one of the key players in the development of the Armenian Civil Society is an Armenian Diaspora. Since 1991, it played an important role in the implementation of diverse reconstruction and humanitarian projects.

The development of Civil Society and its organizations in Armenia continued after the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh that ended in May 1994 with a cease-fire agreement. From 1995 to 2000 this development took place along with the gradual and relative democratization of political institutions and governance in Armenia. CSOs became more organized and target-created trying to address social issues such as unemployment and health. They were intended to spread the values of human rights and democratization according to the typical example of similar organizations in the West.

Armenian Civil Society Today: Mix of Achievements and Failures?

After 25 years of post-communist existence, Armenian Civil Society represents an interesting mix of achievements and failures. Development of Civil Society in Armenia started in difficult circumstances. It was influenced by the collapse of the regime, a war and a devastating earthquake. This was combined with a lack of knowledge, skills and capacity, non-existence of laws, appropriate legal frameworks and necessary infrastructure.

Civil Society in Armenia became an important and recognized stakeholder that is still facing divergent challenges. In order to respond to this changing environment, the Armenian government adopted a policy of creating participative institutions enabling each citizen to get a possibility to participate in the legislative changes of the country through Civil Society organizations. Furthermore, a code of participatory cooperation between some ministries and public organizations has been elaborated, as well as Local Self-Government Law has been amended giving the citizens and Civil Society groups and organizations a right to participate in public hearings and the work of local authorities.

There are several big networks in Armenia, mostly composed of civic organizations that fulfil coordinated actions together with the Parliament, government and other state bodies. Unfortunately, there are also lots of governmentally organized organizations or GONGOs that support unsupported policies of the government, creating an impression that citizens participate in the legislative processes. This way the government tries to legitimize its non-legitimate policies.

During the last 15 years, Civil Society sector in Armenia went through considerable changes and transformations recording new achievements, trends and failures. Understanding the raising role of the NGOs, the state tried to prevent this wave. Ministry of Justice, for example, presented to the government a proposal of amending NGO law, which was approved and entered into the National Assembly of Armenia (the Parliament). However, thanks to coordinated activities of NGOs against this amendment it did not pass. Many high profile NGOs considered this amendment as a worrying signal. Developments around the amendment and the success of NGOs to push lawmakers showed that the power of Civil Society to influence decision-making processes is growing.

Between 2005 and 2006, as well as 2008 and 2010 international organization CIVICUS together with different local and international partners hold an Index of Civil Society aiming to evaluate the state of Civil Society in Armenia. Diverse research methods have been used to analyse collected data in order to give a realistic evaluation. CIVICUS evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the Armenian Civil Society, interestingly noting, that one of the strength of Armenian Civil Society is the legal environment where it functions. Due to this positive legal environment, many organizations and foundations were registered in the country without any obstacles. According to CIVILITAS Foundation, in 2008 there were 2.824 registered organizations, in 2009 – 3.066 and in 2010 - 3.300. The number of registered NGOs in Armenia was 3781 as of January 2012. Nevertheless, according to different data there are 3000-5000 NGOs in Armenia. Yet, one will be able to find precise, up-to-date information only about several dozens of them in the internet or different directories.

There have been different assessments of Civil Society situation in Armenia. One of the assessment mechanisms is the *Sustainability Index* developed by US Agency for International Development (USAID). According to this Index, in 2010 the overall

sustainability of the NGO sector in Armenia had remained unchanged as in 2009, and the results of financial crisis severely affected the NGO sector. Because of limited funding opportunities, the framework of the activities of NGOs started narrowing. Moreover, post-election tensions in 2009 contributed to the development of an atmosphere of apathy among citizens.

In 2012 Sustainability Index reported that “CSOs in Armenia increased their organizational capacity [...] recognized the importance of strategic planning, adopted new technologies to share information and keep themselves updated on nationwide developments in their fields”. Referring to the Ministry of Justice, Index reports 3,432 public organizations, 733 foundations, and 301 legal entity unions registered in Armenia as of October 2012. However, they have estimated that just up to 20% of these institutions were active. One of the significant developments in 2013 according the Index is that “the Armenian government officials and affiliated groups label advocacy and watchdog groups as “grant-eaters” to discredit them [...] there was also state pressure including some inspections, arrests, and fines”. At the same time, advocacy of Civil Society has been improved, and “informal groups were particularly active in advocacy, confronting unfavourable state decisions [...] and continued to improve their institutional capacities”.

Freedom House is another watchdog of freedom and democracy in Armenia and elsewhere in the world. As of 2014 – around 4000 NGOs are registered in Armenia, but many are not operational because of a scarcity of funding or capacity. There are some state-funded organizations that are inactive, and the main aim of the governmental funding of those NGOs is money laundering. Trade unions and Labour organizations are considered weak.

The data from Freedom House’s comprehensive, comparative study “Nations in Transit” that demonstrates the democratic developments in 29 countries from Central Europe to Eurasia shows that “Armenian nongovernmental organizations operate in a generally favourable legislative climate and [...] Armenia’s civil society is vibrant”. They have improved their advocacy, but the “impact of such public advocacy on government policy remains limited”. Nations in Transit report from 2013 suggests that the democratic gap between 3 Caucasian states becomes bigger and bigger where Armenia and Georgia move forward with democratic reforms and Azerbaijan, in contrary, continues “brutal suppression of public gatherings”. Freedom House reports that the political situation in Armenia as of 2014 contributes to the development of civil society and “Armenia’s Civil Society remains active, diverse, and independent”. However, it does not have a fundamental impact on the politics and the level of trust towards Civil Society remains low.

The Role of the EU in the development of the Civil Society in Armenia

The European Union is one of the main donors of the Civil Society in Armenia, and its support to Civil Society has been growing significantly during the last years. As a major stakeholder engaging with Civil Society in Armenia, the European Union emerged only recently. In early 1990s, the Civil Society development took place mainly with the support of US-based donors and American governmental agencies. That is why many Armenian Civil Society organizations have replicated the working styles and habits of similar organizations based in the United States. However, with launching the European Neighbourhood Policy and

especially the Eastern Partnership Program, the EU strengthened its engagement with non-state actors in Armenia becoming the main Civil Society supporter and shaping its further development.

The relations between Armenia and the European Union are based on the EU-Armenia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) that has been signed in 1999. Already in this agreement, we can see the will of the EU to engage itself in the Civil Society development. The Article 68 of the agreement states that “the parties shall encourage contacts and exchanges between their national, regional and judicial authorities [...] and non-governmental organizations”. However, the EU engagement with the Civil Society in Armenia was very limited to technical and humanitarian assistance, and the support to the Civil Society did not represent a priority area of the EU in Armenia. From 1991 to 2006 European assistance to Armenia amounted more than 380 million € and nearly 120 million out of this amount was a humanitarian assistance.

EU technical assistance to Armenia was implemented within TACIS programme that expired in 2006. It was mainly focused on assistance for institutional, legal and administrative reforms, promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises, assistance in addressing the social consequences of transition, development of infrastructure networks, etc. A very small percentage of the money was directed to Civil Society through different programs, such as LIEN programme (Link Inter-European NGOs), IBPP (Institution Building Partnership) and The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights EIDHR (The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights).

LIEN programme was “an initiative of the European Commission to support nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in the social sector in the New Independent States (NIS)”. It was developed by the European Commission on request of the European Parliament in 1992 with an aim to provide funding and technical assistance Civil Society. TACIS LIEN programme was succeeded by the Institution Building Partnership Programme (IBPP) aiming at supporting capacity building process of NGOs, local and regional authorities, as well as professional organizations. These were the main programs that Civil Society benefited from. In the period of 1990-2006, the EU cannot be considered as a major actor involved in the development of Civil Society in Armenia. The same tendency can also be seen in other countries of Eastern Neighbourhood where the EU support was mainly technical.

A new phase of EU engagement with Civil Society in Armenia was marked by the European Neighbourhood Policy. By joining the policy, Armenia was invited to enter into intensified relations with the EU that also influenced the intensification of the relations between the EU and the Armenian Civil Society. The ENP Action Plan that is identifying the main strategic objectives of the cooperation between the EU and Armenia states that the facilitation of the development of Civil Society in Armenia is one of the general objectives of the EU-Armenia cooperation. It also mentions that the parties should contribute to a peaceful solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by promoting the active involvement of Civil Society, as well as its involvement in environmental policy and people-to-people contacts, namely education, training and youth.

The EUs interaction with Civil Society in Armenia takes place in the framework of different programs of the European Union. Through direct funding of the Civil Society and different governmental agencies that are supposed to facilitate Civil Society participation, the

EU is promoting development and strengthening of Civil Society in Armenia. Most of its support had been wired to Civil Society within Eastern Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (2007-2013; 285.1 million €) and now is being implemented through European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) - (2014-2017; 140-170 million €). The total allocation for 2014-2020 under the ENI to Armenia will vary from 252 million € to 308 million € and 5% of this money is allocated as complementary support to civil society organizations. The complementary support means “supporting the role of civil society in building credible and inclusive policy processes, stronger democratic processes and accountability systems. [...] This can include measures aiming to promote a conducive environment at all levels for civil society participation in public life, measures to boost domestic transparency and accountability, including the budgetary process”.

The main areas of EU financial intervention in Armenia under ENI are private sector development, public administration reform and justice sector reform. According to the EU Single Support framework, “support to civil society will be mainstreamed throughout all three sectors of intervention [...] with the ultimate goal of ensuring effective and inclusive policies at the national level”. Unfortunately, as the government of Armenia and its different ministries are the main beneficiaries of the funding, there is a scepticism if all the envisaged reforms will be effectively implemented. However, the only fact that the Civil Society development in Armenia becomes a priority of EU confirms the hypothesis that the EU tries to become more and more engaged stakeholder in the area. Compared to ENPI, the ENI introduces support to Civil Society as a new area of priority and a separate area that is specifically being funded.

One of the EU programmes to support Civil Society organizations in Armenia is the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights Programme (EIDHR) that launched its activities in support of NGOs in Armenia in 2003. The main objective of the Programme is to promote human rights and support Armenia in the areas of democratization, conflict prevention and resolution. In 2003, for example, this Instrument funded 11 projects. Projects covered areas, such as a fight against corruption, peace building between Armenia and Azerbaijan, human rights protection, etc. The number of funded projects under EIDHR increased to 15 in 2010 and 12 in 2012. Some of the projects are long-term, such as for example establishing a one year MA Program in Human Rights and Democratization at the Centre of the European Studies of Yerevan State University for students coming from Armenia, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova.

The EIDHR, however, did not prioritize Civil Society Organizations in processes of democratization at the beginning of the funding in the Eastern Neighbourhood of the EU. Very often funds were granted to professional and big organizations, such as the Council of Europe or UN Agencies. Thus, the smaller organization did not manage to benefit from this Instrument. This situation changed in 2005, after new developments in the East, such as the rose revolution in Georgia and orange revolution in Ukraine.

The interest of the EU in Armenia has grown largely after launching the Eastern Partnership in 2009. Civil Society viewed this process as an opportunity for transformation based on the European democratic values. With the establishment of the Eastern Partnership, the role of Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership countries has been given more importance by the EU.

In 2011, the 22nd clause of Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Warsaw confirmed that Civil Society plays an important role in persuading the goals of Eastern Partnership Program. The statement underlined that the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership and its National Platforms are important in promoting democratic values. Furthermore, the declaration highlighted that the EU support to Civil Society will be carried out through different mechanisms, such as Civil Society Facility and European Endowment for Democracy.

Highlighting the role of Civil Society within the Eastern Partnership, the Civil Society Forum was established. The first meeting of the Civil Society Forum took place on 16 November 2009 in Brussels. During the meeting four groups were formed which had to work in the following fields: Democracy, Human Rights, good governance and stability, Economic integration and convergence with the EU policies, Environment, climate change and energy security and Contacts between people. Additionally, the organizations that are involved in the National Platform of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership are generally active in the process of Armenia's European integration and impact its deepening.

Following the Arab Spring, the EU tried to create a mechanism of quick, less bureaucratic and effective reaction to the democratic changes happening in the EU Neighbourhood. With this intention, the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) was created under the Polish Presidency of the European Union. The Endowment claims to support ideas that are unsupported. The application process is relatively easy, and there is no deadline. So far, it funded 155 initiatives all over the Neighbourhood.

It is not possible to access the number of projects that have been funded in Armenia or any other country in order to make sure that grantees do not face personal security concerns back in their countries. However, the web-site provides an information on 9 funded projects in Armenia in the areas of women rights protection, increasing the role of Civil Society in political processes, strengthening freedom of expression, providing legal assistance to activists, governing urban green spaces, etc. It is not possible to assess the difference that the European Endowment for Democracy makes in Armenia as the number of projects and the amount granted are very limited. At the same, EED is a new tool, and there are yet no reports that can provide any information about financed projects, their overall budget, impact and outcome.

One of the largest EU funding tools to the Civil Society and especially youth organizations in Armenia was the Eastern Partnership Youth in Action Window (EPYW) that was launched under the Youth in Action Programme for the period 2012-2013. It was set up in order to address identified needs of young people in Eastern Partnership countries by promoting regional cooperation between policy institutions, youth organizations, youth workers and young people. Out of six countries of the Eastern Partnership Armenia and Georgia had the biggest number of beneficiaries with Armenia having 151 projects funded and Georgia - 186. Eastern Partnership Youth in Action Window became the biggest and the most accessible fund for youth organizations in Armenia.

One of the EU tools to strengthen Civil Society in Armenia is a project "Support to Democratic Governance in Armenia" implemented by British Council. As it has been mentioned in the previous Chapter, the project contributed to the amending of the Law on Public Organizations in accordance with the EU standards. The program was launched in

March 2014 with four components. One of the components is strengthening the capacity of Civil Society.

According to the British Council “the project will promote strengthening of the capacity of civil society to become more engaged in the legal reform and the monitoring of its implementation, to carry out social entrepreneurship and other financial activities, to be better involved in political analysis and active citizenship”. The foremost outcome that is expected by the program in the area of strengthening Civil Society is “strengthened capacity of the CSOs to engage actively in policy reforms and monitoring their implementation, to become financially independent and capable to undertake entrepreneurship activities, and to engage the public in the monitoring of reform processes in order to increase the government transparency and accountability”.

The Delegation of the EU in Armenia mainly works with state authorities, political parties, Civil Society representatives and organizations, as well as the media, educational institutions and international organizations. In order to give the Civil Society the possibility to voice their views on different relevant issues on the development of EU-Armenia relations, the Delegation created web-based consultative page, where the organizations can register and submit their views. This aims to ensure better interaction between the European Union and Civil Society in Armenia.

The EU Delegation to Armenia launched an EU Info Centre in Yerevan within the EU funded project “Support to the EU communication on reforms in Armenia”. The duration of the project was two years from 2012-2014. The principal idea of the EU Centre in Armenia was assuring the quality of the publicity materials of the EU funded projects and assisting them in their communication efforts.

The EU Centre with an office in the very heart of Yerevan also provides its premises to the Civil Society organizations that hold EU funded projects or initiatives which are anyhow related to Europe and European values. The interest of Civil Society organizations, however, was rather limited in the Centre. Most of the organizations that benefited from the Centre were EU funded youth organizations or start-up initiatives. One of the interesting projects by the EU Centre was the establishment of the EU Alumni Network in 2013 that included 8 active NGOs operating in Armenia. The Network is supposed to “unite the past participants of the European educational programmes in Armenia, [...] foster the involvement of young people in the European educational programmes at different levels in formal education, non-formal and informal learning activities providing them with information, support and guidance”. However, after its establishment there has not been any further progress with the Network and its efficiency is rather limited.

Lastly, the European Union has become a serious actor influencing the development of the Civil Society in Armenia in different domains. Thanks to various projects aimed at strengthening its capacity to actively engage in policy making, monitoring of the governmental policies and becoming financially independent, the Civil Society performance has improved and in many areas it became a vocal stakeholder. However, there have been also various side effects of this influence.

Challenges and opportunities of the EU engagement with Civil Society in Armenia

There is sizeable scepticism and suspicion when it comes to the foreign assistance of various donors aiming to strengthen Civil Societies in third countries. Some of the critics argue that instead of strengthening the NGOs, donors weaken them and their role in democratization processes by their financial assistance. Without supporting any of these arguments, it should be mentioned, however, that the lack of understanding of the existing environment where donors support Civil Society and the public attitudes that are generated as a consequence of this support, harm the overall image of Civil Society and result in many side effects. There are potential risks in promoting Civil Society in developing countries.

Some of the side effects mentioned in the academic literature are concerns that instead of giving a voice to voiceless segments of the society and empowering the vulnerable groups, Civil Society organizations are promoting themselves. Furthermore, the external support for NGOs in developing countries results in their weakening and a risk of overdependence from donor organizations.

When it comes to the European Union assistance to the Civil Society in Armenia, these concerns are also relevant. There are several challenges the EU faces in its support to Civil Society in Armenia. Here I distinguish some of the major challenges:

Proper assessment of the needs of Civil Society: Very often the European Union is being accused for funding projects that are very far from being needed in particular societies. This problem exists both when the EU is dealing with the Civil Society inside of the EU and in its external relations with Civil Society in third countries. There is a major problem in the EU with proper needs assessments in the countries where they fund Civil Society organizations. This also applies to the case of Armenia.

The lack of proper assessment results in detached priorities of the EU, which are not necessarily priorities of their beneficiaries and the communities they represent. However, taking into account all the financial constraints these organizations are facing, they reshape their goals and come up with projects that would fit into requirements of the European Union. This projects, for obvious reasons, do not impact massively the communities of beneficiaries, but instead impact the Civil Society organizations which gain a financial capacity to maintain further their sustainable existence.

In order to understand if the European Union is aware of this issue, I have conducted some interviews at the European Commission during my visit to Brussels. In one of the interviews, the head of the team of “Regional Programmes Neighbourhood East” at Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations Carmen Falkenberg Ambrosio mentioned that the EU is aware that this problem exists. According to her “there are some NGOs that look for money and they change from year to year to fit the annual priorities of the European Union. The way the European Union responds to that is its priorities that are set up in EU programs. Those priorities are agreed together with the EU Member States. Those priorities are set up for seven years, and the NGOs already know about them as they are available online. The need assessments of Civil Societies on the ground are made by the EU Delegations together with the European Commission. They consult Civil Society in order to come up with priorities.

There are overall priorities of the EU, but there are also local priorities in terms of local calls done by delegations. The global calls for funding are worldwide, but specific ones are available on the web-sites of EU delegations. It is also important to mention that the EU is not a service provider. So, if, for example, there is a local need of improving the situation of local schools, the EU will not necessarily provide school building, but it would support the NGOs to advocate for the school building. In that sense it might be assumed that the EU does not correspond to the local needs, because it is not building the school but, at the same time, it supports the Civil Society organizations to become stronger and lobby for this cause or any other causes that might arise in the future”.

Yet, this system of need assessments of the European Commission in third countries remains rather unclear. Every EU delegation has its own mechanisms of consulting the local CSOs and in every country there are different levels of CSO development and various political and economic environments in which these organizations operate. The direct link between Brussels and Civil Society organizations in third countries is still weak.

Inclusion of diverse Civil Society Actors: Another challenge of the European Union in its assistance to Armenia and other Eastern Partnership countries is making sure that all the various Civil Society actors, may be not equally, benefit from its support. One of the reasons that small, non-experienced and new organizations have troubles to be funded by the EU is their lack of knowledge of the EU funding system and difficulty to comply with all the requirements. Additionally, the EU funds are often monopolized by the well experienced organizations that have built their capacity thanks to long-term EU funding. On one hand, there are experienced “grant merchants” hunting for all possible funds. They are very familiar with the EU jargon and know all the techniques how to sell their ideas to the EU. On the other hand, there are un-experienced organizations whose participation as an active Civil Society organization can bring some changes and added value to the overall situation of Civil Society in Armenia. Those organizations, however, do not possess the necessary knowledge on EU funds and are not familiar with the rules of fundraising and the complicated application and reporting requirements of the EU. This leads to further strengthening of already strong Civil Society actors and potentially excludes those who could bring some fresh air and innovation to the field.

The high level of bureaucracy and complicated regulations result in the exclusion of the smaller NGOs and contribute to the creation of “NGO-mafia” that holds a monopoly over the EU funds in Armenia. This assumption can be confirmed by the numbers given in the EU Financial Transparency System. For instance, the International Centre for Human Development has received 10.000 € in 2008, 1.950.000 € in 2010 and 79.320 € in 2013. The similar case can be observed with Eurasia Partnership Foundation with 34.727 € in 2009 and 63.650 € in 2011. Except foundation and NGOs, there has been similar tendency in funding Limited liability companies. In 2010, the LLC Deem Communication had been granted with 43.680 €. In 2011, it increased up till 50.980, in 2012 to 79.890 € and, finally, up till 98.750 € in 2013. These numbers confirm that the EU has been funding bigger and more experienced organizations enabling them to secure sustainable funding. The EU also consults mainly these organizations and these consultations have proven to be largely ineffective so far and are being treated as a necessary formality.

This has not been the case with smaller organizations till 2012 when the Eastern Partnership Youth Window (EPYW) was launched for 2012-2013. During this period, dozens

of small organizations applied for the EU funding and were successful to be granted for several projects. Relatively easy regulations and reporting requirements boosted many organizations to apply. Of course, this also resulted in a creation of number of organizations that functioned only throughout 2012-2013 with a sole purpose to obtain funds under the EPYW. However, this showcases that through simplifying the procedures and requirements of funding the EU can foster the participation of less active and less capable organizations and engage them in the Civil Society development processes.

Management of the EU funds, measuring the impact and ownership: Not always the EU has a capacity to monitor properly how the funds it granted have been used. This also creates a discontent amongst the EU citizens who pay taxes, so that the EU can promote democracy in third countries. In case of Armenia, this problem has been identified in a briefing paper requested by the by the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs back in 2008. The paper suggests that “the efficiency of EU sponsored projects would increase considerably with better management from the EU side”.

Along with the lack of appropriate management, the EU is considered by its beneficiaries in Armenia as a donor and not a partner. This also explains a lack of an ownership of some organizations towards their projects. At the same time, the EU considers the NGOs as beneficiaries of its assistance and not institutional partners. In the projects where the local NGOs are couple with European NGOs, the lack of local ownership is also an issue, because the knowledge of local needs does not make the local NGOs the leaders of those joint projects. This situation can be changed with further capacity building projects for NGO representatives.

It is very difficult to measure the impact that Civil Society organization funded by the EU have and the impact that the EU has on Civil Society organizations. There is also no single database, portal or directory where one can find concise information about the projects funded by the EU, their outcomes, successes and failures, budgets and target groups. Such a portal could help Civil Society organizations to update the progress they have made after the project finished and whether they managed to secure the sustainability of their project, or it was a one-off initiative.

Engaging Civil Society in peacebuilding and conflict prevention Activities: When it comes to EU role in engaging Civil Society in peacebuilding and conflict prevention activities, the EU is almost absent from Armenia and from the South Caucasus despite the fact that is one of the most troubled region with diverse and complex conflicts. The European Union is reluctant towards supporting Armenian and Azerbaijani Civil Societies to start peace-building projects and to encourage tolerance and reconciliation through Civil Society organizations.

Furthermore, the EU has the tools that could be employed to support the conflict prevention in the region. One of the tools that has not been used in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the EU Instrument for Stability that has been created in 2007 by the European Commission to work in the area of conflict prevention, crisis management and peace building. Especially the Peace-building Partnership that is a part of the Instrument for Stability could be used that is created to strengthen civilian expertise for peace-building activities. In 2012, the Instrument for Stability received a positive opinion of the EU Member States to support to a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, this

support either has not been provided or has not reached Civil Society organizations in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

One of the reasons that the EU does not engage with this particular conflict might be the fear of the reaction of the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments with whom EU is holding a high-level dialogues in different domains. One of the other reasons might be the crackdown on the Civil Society in Azerbaijan, where Civil Society organizations cannot engage in the peace-building projects as it is considered as a national treason. In contrary, in Armenia NGOs find it easier to engage in “conflict-related activities with a bilateral character”.

The only visible EU program with engagement of Civil Society Actors in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK) that promotes a dialogue between policymakers, media and civil society representatives from Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is funded under the Instrument for Stability and represents a consortium of five European NGOs and local partners that work together to impact positively the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement process.

The European Union seems to be more successful as a conflict manager when it comes to engaging Civil Society in Armenia-Turkey normalization process. Under the Instrument for Stability that has not been that well deployed in the previous case, the EU funds “Support to the Armenia-Turkey Normalisation Process” Programme with an overall budget of 2 million €. The programme is being implemented by a Consortium of 8 Civil Society organizations from Armenia and Turkey and aims to promote civil society efforts towards the normalisation of relations between two countries. The Consortium only manages the funds but is not implementing the projects itself. It creates Grant Schemes and invites individuals and civil society organizations from Armenia and Turkey to submit their own project ideas and grants are ranging from 5,000 to 30,000 euros. Within this Programme, dozens of projects, researches, fellowships, movies, art projects, travel grants, study visits were funded increasing the level of participation of the Armenian Civil Society in Armenia-Turkey normalization process.

Impact of the National Platforms of the EaP Civil Society Forum National Platforms: As it was already mentioned, in order to achieve the goals of the Eastern Partnership National Platforms of Civil Society Forum has been created in all the Eastern Partnership Countries. However, the engagement of National Platforms with national governments remains rather limited. One of the problems with National Platforms is the fact that the same Civil Society organizations are represented in them, and they become kind of closed circles. Even though on the paper the recruitment into the National Platform in Armenia is easy and should be accessible to all the organizations that fulfil some criteria, there are still some difficulties. Another issue is that the Platform is not very attractive, and its mission and goals are not well promoted among local Civil Society organizations.

Further Recommendations and Remarks

The EU shall work more closely and directly with the Civil Society Organizations, grassroots associations and social movements, because supporting Civil Society through cooperation with local authorities and the governments has proven to be not efficient and money-consuming. State interference in the management of EU funds can result in unfair fund distribution funding of NGOs that are governmentally created or oriented. The support should be addressed directly to CSOs, without any intermediary actors. Except raising the efficiency, this will raise the ownership of the Civil Society organizations towards their projects and will strengthen their capacity to engage actively in the policy making processes. The EU shall also increase the opportunities for NGOs based in EaP to apply directly for funding. In the cases when the project is applied by the EU partner organizations of EaP based NGOs, there is a lack of ownership.

➤ The EU needs to conduct a proper need-assessment in the countries of the EaP. The assessments conducted by the EU Delegations and the European Commission are not sufficient to fully understand the situation on the ground. Local experts and Civil Society organizations shall be consulted and included in this assessment, ensuring that the local knowledge and expertise is taken into consideration. In order to have a proper picture of the reality in different EaP countries, the EU can establish a network of experts in the EaP which will be responsible for need-assessments together with the European experts. The network can include representatives of 6 EaP countries and experts from EU countries from Eastern and Central Europe. There are many similarities between EaP countries and in most of the cases Civil Societies face similar challenges. What's more, the experts based in the region can better understand and evaluate the situation. This can have a considerable impact on the efficiency of the EU assistance and will support the EU to be able to correspond to the real needs of the Civil Societies by shaping funding priorities based on those needs and not vice versa.

➤ The EU should encourage entrepreneurship of Civil Society Organizations in the EaP in order to make sure they do not become financially over-dependant from the EU. This can be done by pressuring the local authorities to amend the laws which prohibit NGOs to provide paid services and generate income. This can be a major solution for NGOs to be able to secure long-term financial sustainability and not to hunt for every possible EU grant. The financial independence of the Civil Society both from the state and the foreign donors will create a possibility to self-fund their own projects and carry out truly independent activities.

➤ In order to increase sustainability of the EU funded projects in the EaP, the European Commission can create an open and accessible on-line database or portal, where all the beneficiaries of the EU in the EaP will be obliged to publish information about their projects, indicating the main goals, the main activities, the overall budget of the projects and to provide with information whether the goals of the project were achieved, what was the expected impact and the real impact after the implementation of the project. This platform can also suggest to beneficiaries to add information about the sustainability of the project and how it was followed up after the funding from the EU stopped. Except providing tools for ensuring accountability and transparency of the EU funded projects, this can also contribute to measuring a better impact of those projects and will encourage sharing of best practices across

the EaP. The other donors and enterprises can be also encouraged to register in the portal, learn about the projects and further support the sustainability of those projects after the EU funds are over. Creation of a comprehensive framework for detaining the results of the EU funded projects in the EaP countries will increase their outreach.

➤ The EU should make sure that the procedures of application and funding are more applicant friendly and accessible not only for experienced “grant-hunters” but also for less experienced Civil Society Organizations based in the region. Time-consuming, complicated and very technical guidelines coupled with complex requirements and bureaucratic reporting procedures, do not allow small and newly established organizations to benefit from EU funds and bring in their perspective and innovation. These changes and simplifications will create equal opportunities for all the Civil Society actors and will avoid the situation where organizations with bigger experience and perfect knowledge of EU funding rules and technicalities will monopolize the sphere. To partly solve this situation, the EU can encourage its agencies to provide training to newcomers in European programs on the management of EU funds, project management, fundraising, monitoring and evaluation tools, reporting, etc.

➤ Merely increasing the budget for Civil Society organizations in EaP is not a long-term solution to the issues they face. The increased budget should come along with an increased responsibility of the EU to monitor the spending of the budget and to make sure the funded projects follow the objectives they have envisaged in during the application process. It is also important to check the nature of the beneficiaries of the EU grants. Those can be NGOs that are created by the government and are being used to bring more money for those projects that should have been implemented by the governments itself. Funding of GONGOs can be a very negative development and will further contribute to the low trusts towards NGOs and the EU in Armenia. To manage this, a list or a database of EU beneficiary organizations can be created that will contain the data of the organization with their goals and mission. Furthermore, the final financial reports of the received EU funding can be made available which will increase the accountability of those organizations.

➤ The EU has to be less reluctant towards supporting Civil Society organizations to engage in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes. The EU has already all the necessary tools which can be employed to support the conflict prevention in the region. The EU can employ the Instrument for Stability along with its Peace-building Partnership - component in order to strengthen civilian expertise for peace-building activities in EaP. EUs active involvement in funding peacebuilding activities and encouraging Civil Society organizations in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine to undertake bigger role in area can be seen in respective societies as a sign that the EU supports peace and stability in the region. Additionally, the EU can assist Civil Society building in conflict areas, such as Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria.

➤ Further support to improving the NGO legislation in EaP countries should be one of the main goals of the EU. As long as the legal environment in these countries is not favourable, the EU assistance to Civil Society will remain not efficient. In some countries, such as Armenia, Georgia and Moldova there has been a major progress in this area. The laws are more NGO friendly and do not create artificial legal barriers for operating. However, this is not the case in Azerbaijan and Belarus, for example, where the laws limit Civil Society organizations to operate freely and smoothly register. The registration requirements remain time-consuming and complicated. This is combined with governmental pressure, a crackdown

on Civil Society organizations and massive repressions. In case of Azerbaijan, the EU is still reluctant to critically observe the situation and to respond to it through its diplomatic and political channels. This energy-interest driven politics of the EU contradicts to the claims that it is a normative power. The EU can reinforce the assistance to Civil Society actors operating in difficult and dangerous environment by reinforcing its support through European Endowment for Democracy and the EIDHR.

➤ The EU should further prioritize those Civil Society organizations that are not functioning in the capital cities of EaP. Further involvement of Civil Society organizations in rural areas and small communities can have bigger and more sustainable impact. Some of the researchers suggest that NGOs enjoy high-level support in rural communities and small communities, where their work is more visible. This shall be taken into consideration, and big organization shall be encouraged to open branches or offices in regions. Small organizations shall be encouraged to move their projects from urban to rural areas. This will develop rural infrastructure and help local communities.

➤ Together with improving its assistance mechanisms to the Civil Society organizations in EaP, the EU should also pay bigger attention to the visibility of this assistance. There could be additional funds allocated for promoting EU funded projects, publication of materials, organization of promotional campaigns offline and online, a creation of visibility materials, videos, movies, etc. Furthermore, these promotional materials should be published in local languages to make sure they are accessible for all the people who don't speak English or Russian. This can raise the visibility of the EU and will encourage NGOs to improve their public communication strategies. These reforms will make the EU more present in EaP and will create a positive image of the NGOs that are supported by the EU.

➤ The European Commission should consider reopening the Eastern Partnership Youth Window for the period 2016-2020, so the youth organization can directly benefit from funds in the fields of Education and Training. The closure of the Window resulted in a situation where already empowered organizations could not any longer operate. Re-launching the Window will secure long-term sustainability of the Civil Society organizations and will maintain the cooperation of EaP based organizations with EU-based organizations promoting a further exchange of practices, knowledge and experiences.

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