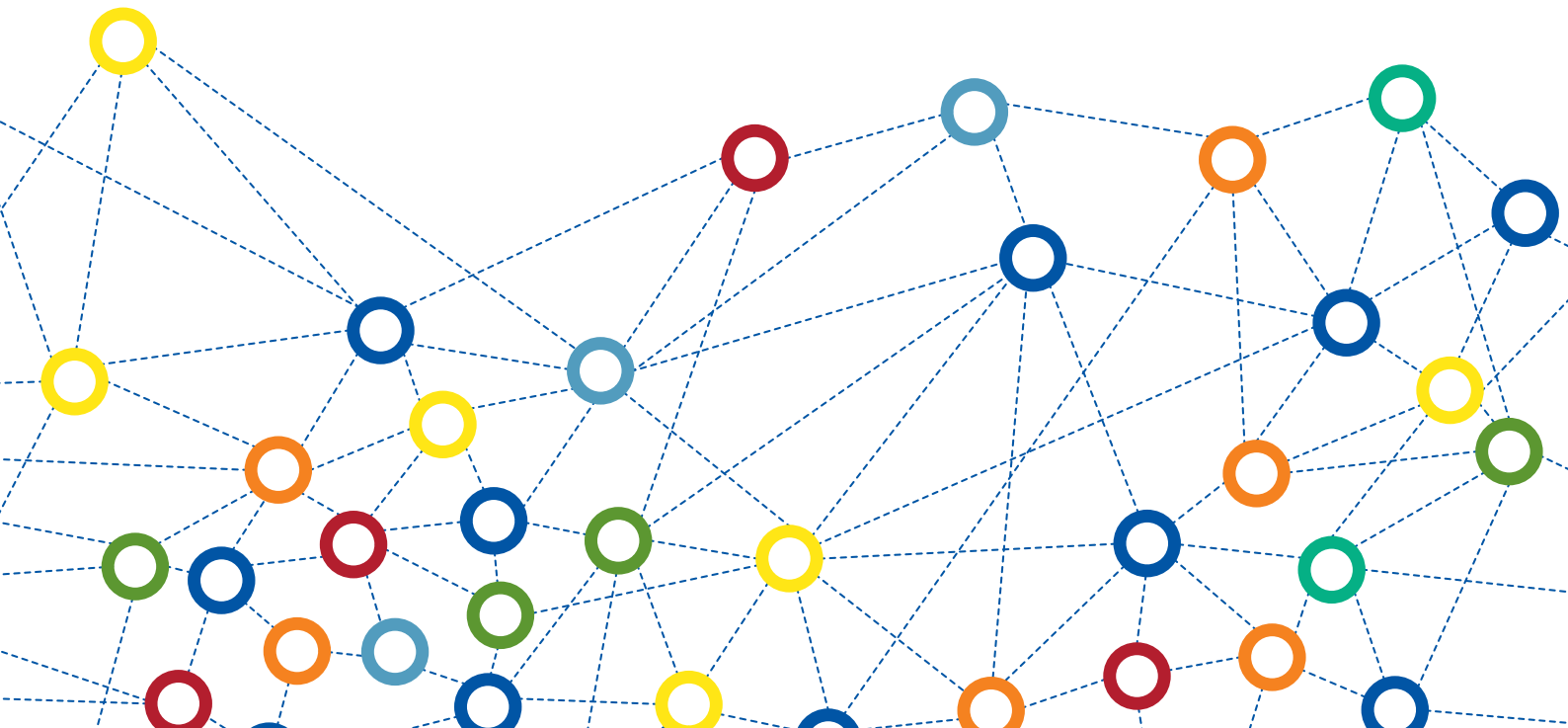


Cooperation between civil society and state sector: problems and solutions

Summary of the expert panel discussion



ORGANIZERS:

— Prague Security Studies Institute, Czech Republic



PARTNERS:

- International Center for Defence and Security, Estonia
- Foreign Policy Association, Moldova
- Kharkiv Crises Infocenter, Kharkiv, Ukraine
- The Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, Georgia



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COOPERATION BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND STATE SECTOR: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Civil society is an important element in maintaining and strengthening national resilience. Representatives of the Eastern Partnership countries presented an inside view on the cooperation between the civil society and the public sector as well as key problems and new opportunities for improving cooperation between the two sectors during the panel discussion “Cooperation between civil society and the public sector: problems and solutions”, organized by the Prague Security Studies Institute (Czech Republic) in Kharkiv, Ukraine. The panel discussion included reviews of civil society in the three countries of the Eastern Partnership of the EU: Ukraine (Natalia Kurdyukova, head of the media project “Nakipelo”, Kharkiv, Ukraine), Georgia (Keti Emukhvari, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS), Georgia) and Moldova (Danu Marin, Association for Foreign Policy (APE), Moldova). The discussion was moderated by Anna Bulakh, International Center for Defense and Security (ICDS), Estonia / Ukraine.

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES IN THE FACE OF CONTEMPORARY THREATS

"By national resilience we mean full-fledged cooperation between the state and civil society in a time of crisis"

Anna Bulakh, *International Center for Defense and Security (ICDS), Estonia / Ukraine.*

Civil activism in Ukraine became the key link in deterring Russia's aggression and acted as a catalyst for internal changes and reforms. Ukraine, like the other European Union Eastern Partnership countries, has demonstrated that the civil sector is able to realize its potential, but it often faces a number of problems, especially in establishing effective cooperation with state institutions and local authorities. It is the problem of communication and openness between the state and civil sectors that is currently one of the key obstacles in the activities and development of civil society in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

In all of the countries represented, examples of successful cooperation between non-governmental organizations and state authorities can be found. As a result of the comparison it can be noted that in the Eastern Partnership countries civil society takes an oppositional stance. The worst situation is in Moldova, where civil society is helpless against the backdrop of a political and social crisis. The emergence of a number of "manual" and "controlled" non-governmental organizations has become a practice in political games in Moldova, which has a negative effect on the stability of the country in conditions of hybrid threats in the region of the Eastern Partnership. All three countries - Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia - faced the problem of territorial conflicts and external aggression. Russia is involved in the conflict in Georgia with the breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia on its territory, Moldova with the unrecognized Transnistria Republic (Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic), and Armenia and Azerbaijan with Nagorno-Karabakh Republic on their common border, and now in Ukraine, where the Russian Federation annexed the Crimea and continues its military presence on the territory of Donbass.

The methods that Russia applied at the first stages of the crisis in Ukraine were aimed at a weak link - the lack of trust between the society and the state institutions. By discrediting with the help of disinformation and sabotage operations the Ukrainian state power, the aggressor gets the support of the society for its military actions. The Kremlin effectively exploited weak social cohesion in Ukraine, corruption, absence of a national-state narrative, lack of trust and cooperation between the state, civil society and citizens themselves.

After three years of the conflict, the main task has become to work on specific responses to threats on the basis of identified weaknesses. In the context of modern threats, the notion of "national resilience" is a key response aimed at developing the ability of society to adapt and at the same time progressively develop amid the intensive impact of crises, without damage to its national interests. Under the term "resilience" used in this context, we mean the activation of full-fledged cooperation between the state and civil society in a time of crisis as an integral and complementary system of national security. In Ukraine, civil society was able to self-organize in the time of crisis and support the Ukrainian state. Civil society in Georgia and Moldova are also actively involved in countering anti-Western propaganda which discredits the European integration vector adopted by both countries, undermining public support and trust of state institutions.

UKRAINE

"In Ukraine civil initiatives replace power rather than successfully cooperating with it,"

Natalia Kurdyukova, head of the media project "Nakipelo." Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Active development of civil society in Ukraine started after the outbreak of the war in the east. Volunteers began to supply the army, help the military and refugees (internally displaced persons). Unfortunately, at the most difficult moments for the country, the authorities showed passivity, and three years later civil society is still forced to take on the responsibilities of the government sector. The war has become a major catalyst for the consolidation of citizens and a stimulus for the emergence of a new civil society. There have appeared a large number of initiatives aimed at supporting the army and volunteers.

In the front-line city of Kharkiv civil society has developed incredibly over the past three years. One of the successful examples of consolidation of civil society was the media project "Nakipelo". In 2014 a group of activists from Kharkiv collected information about what was happening in the city and broadcast it outside the region. At that time it was a necessity, because in other parts of Ukraine there was an impression that the so-called "Kharkovskaya People's Republic" had already appeared in Kharkiv. Over time, the activists organized a press center "Nakipelo", where they accumulated information, held press conferences on topical issues. They reacted quickly in a changing situation, while local media did not show the necessary flexibility. The issue of information security became the key in countering foreign aggression in Ukraine, and the civil sector demonstrated its effectiveness in neutralizing information attacks.

Another successful project in the civil sector of the Kharkiv region was the "Initiative Group to Support Medical Reform". Volunteers organized in the town of Chuguiv, Kharkiv region, a testing ground where they tried some basic principles of the reform. But it became possible not because of any active support of the authorities. Rather, state structures had to give in to the demands of activists.

Communication between local authorities and non-governmental organizations is based on the principles of confrontation and ignoring one another. The need to develop partnership is obvious, since isolated activity of the two key sectors demonstrates a low level of trust and consequently has a negative impact on the consolidation of society.

Assessing civil society in comparison with its state at the beginning of the conflict in 2014, some initiatives that began from helping the army are now reoriented to social and cultural projects, as can be seen in the example of the organization "Kharkiv With You". First, its participants were engaged in military support, and now organize cultural festivals. Civil society in Ukraine is still in the phase of inception and development and the reorientation of some organizations serves as evidence. Non-governmental organizations need more financial and educational support to create and implement projects more effectively by applying innovative approaches.

CIVIL SECTOR ACHIEVEMENTS:

- Activists and civil organizations acted as a catalyst for the consolidation of society
- Supported the state in resisting aggression (material and informational);
- Monitor the implementation of reforms on site;
- Became an impetus for creating and promoting independent media;
- There is a reorientation of civil organizations activity towards narrower areas of activity, which indicates growth of professionalism.

Using Kharkiv region as an example, we can identify several key problems that the civil sector faces in Ukraine. The problem of communication both between civil organizations and between civil and public sectors negatively affects the results of initiated projects. Thus, information about their activities does not reach society. As a result, although Kharkiv is large and has most effective civil initiatives, it is still perceived as a “gray spot”.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES:

- In Ukraine, only a few media entities are independent from pro-government structures;
- There is lack of successful civil initiatives which would properly communicate with the authorities, effectively or efficiently;
- Civil initiatives rather substitute the authorities - not successfully cooperate with them;
- There is a problem in communication between government and civil society, between regions and civil initiatives;
- Disruption of communication between regions creates a problem with the coverage of successful projects.

GEORGIA

“The civil sector plays a critical role in strengthening democracy in Georgia”

Keti Emukhvari, *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Rondeli Foundation), Georgia.*

In Georgia, consolidation of civil society has brought great results. It is the civil sector that plays a critical role in strengthening democracy. The lack of a consolidated opposition to the current government and the low level of decentralization in Georgia imposes on the civil sector an important role of democratic control.

The following achievements of the civil sector in Georgia can be distinguished:

- Civil organizations demonstrate growing professionalism in the areas of monitoring, policy, transparency and accountability of the government;
- They are a channel of objective information and control over the activities of the government;
- They are open to association and consolidation (creation of coalitions), which increases influence of the civil sector on the government;
- Participate in the development of strategic documents on a regular basis;
- The Georgian Government itself engages in proactive communication with the civil sector, which is a credit of trust to the civil sector;
- Over the past few years, the government has become more receptive to the reaction of community organizations.

Over the last 5-6 years Georgian non-governmental organizations have become stronger and more qualified. This is especially true of their role in monitoring, policy, transparency and accountability of the government. Influential watchdog organizations not only increased their influence on the government, but also increased civil awareness of the general public. In Georgia, as in Ukraine and Moldova, there are few independent media outlets, but it is through them that non-governmental organizations can inform citizens about what is going on in the government, what expenses and revenues the state has. By method of association, following the example of the “The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum - Georgian National Platform (founded in 2010, which was joined by more than 160 non-governmental organizations), civil organizations gained significant access to representatives of government and state structures. Also in recent years, such organizations have formed several ad hoc coalitions with shared goals in order to have a greater policy impact.

Comparing the experience of Georgia and other Eastern Partnership countries, we can say that this country is leading in positive practices of cooperation between state institutions and the civil sector. There are already a number of examples of involvement of non-governmental organizations in the development of strategic documents in Georgia. Thus, in 2013 NGOs prepared a Strategic Defense Review for the Ministry of Defense and helped the Office on European and Euro-Atlantic integration with writing the communication strategy. Other positive examples of CSO-government cooperation are the Inter-Agency Council on Criminal Justice Reform, the Human Rights Dialogue and a civil advisory unit created by the State Ministry for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration as well as the new amendments to the Labour Code based on consultations with civil society actors amendments to the law on common courts that took into account recommendations from civil society and many more.

The proactive communication of state institutions with civil society testifies to the “acceptance” of the third sector, which is often absent in post-Soviet countries. The administration of the President of Georgia and the National Security Council themselves initiate dialogues with non-governmental organizations, experts, journalists on the issues of the security strategy.

Georgia has become one of the successful examples among the Eastern Partnership countries in engaging civil society representatives in the process of the elaboration of the Association Agenda 2017-2020 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia. The process of European integration is still the main target of disinformation and is used in anti-Western propaganda. With the introduction of the visa-free regime, information attacks have significantly increased: fake news has been broadcast in the media, anti-Western media and non-governmental organizations with unknown funding sources have appeared. Russian media also increased their influence. To reduce the impact of anti-Western propaganda, the government has been cooperating with the non-governmental sector.

However, accepting assistance from such associations, the government is in no hurry to support them financially, therefore, Georgian NGOs are very dependent on financial assistance from foreign donors. The shortage of human resources and lack of sustainability lead to low interest in cooperation with such organizations. Georgian government agencies are not ready to pay for services or recommendations, but willingly accept assistance from non-governmental organizations whose activities are paid by donors.

The main problems and challenges in the development of civil society in Georgia:

- High level of aid dependency. Main source of CSO funding is international aid. Sustainability represents one of the main challenges for the donor funded CSOs. there is no internal financial support.
- Regional and Central NGOs do not possess equal access and capacities to compete for the donor resources.
- Lack of consolidated political opposition, which threatens to damage democracy and imposes on the civil sector the functions of democratic control.
- Some government agencies are less cooperative than the others especially in state security sector.
- The word non-governmental organization is often used by the anti-Western media or populist sources in a negative context. The role of nongovernmental organizations is still not perceived correctly among the ordinary public, especially in the regions.
- There is a problem with decentralization. Until now, local authorities have coordinated all decisions with the center, which limits the role of local public organizations.

MOLDOVA

“Many of the non-governmental organizations in Moldova either do not act, or are a façade for political interests,”

Danu Marin, Association for Foreign Policy (APE), Moldova.

Georgia and Ukraine overtook Moldova in the activities of civil society. As in Georgia, non-governmental organizations are developing as a result of the support of foreign donors. However, Moldova still has few non-governmental organizations that have been established at the community level.

According to the Ministry of Justice, there are about 11,000 non-governmental organizations in Moldova, that is, one organization per 300 people. But this does not mean that Moldova has an active civil sector. Many of these organizations either do not operate, or are a façade for political interests. The results of the implementation of the National Civil Society Development Strategy (2012-2015) show that the majority of the three priorities outlined in the strategy were not fulfilled.

Three priority areas (not implemented / implemented / partially implemented):

- Participation and transparency (55/36/9)
- Financial sustainability of CSOs (68/19/13)
- Civic engagement and volunteerism (68/26/6)

The term “non-governmental organization” (NGO) is still not perceived by the population of Moldova as an exceptionally positive phenomenon (a common feature in post-Soviet countries). The government often uses “manual” non-governmental organizations to achieve its goals, what undermines public confidence in the civil sector. The current situation can be described as a *crisis of confidence* both for the government and for civil organizations in Moldova.

According to the results of public opinion polls, the level of public confidence in government institutions used to be about 30%, now - 8-9%. There are also increasing doubts about honesty of the media and the justice system. By 2014-2015, the trust to coalition has dropped even worse than under the Communists. Polarization of society is one of the results of polarization in the government itself after the arrival of the pro-Russian president and the pro-European coalition in parliament. Since the level of confidence in the civilian sector has been falling in recent years, non-governmental organizations have not been able to gain a critical mass, thereby losing their strength to support democratic processes.

Cooperation between the government and the civil society can be divided into institutional and non-institutional. The National Council for Participation (NPC) is one of the main instruments of institutionalized cooperation between the government and civil society. The Council was established in 2010 on the initiative of the Government as an advisory organization (30 representatives of NGOs) with the mandate for two years. The Council's mission was to develop a strategic partnership between the civil sector and the government to facilitate participation of civil society in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policy documents. The Council had five working groups: (1) Justice and human rights; (2) Economics, finance and business; (3) Security and foreign policy; (4) Social protection, health and education; (5) Environment and sustainable development. In non-institutional cooperation, it is possible to single out joint working groups, joint organization of public events. However, such cooperation mainly takes place on a project basis, which worsens communication.

Civil sector achievements:

- Civil society is developing well, but only due to support from external partners;
- Non-governmental organizations successfully cooperate with the state in the following areas: joint work on the implementation of the Moldova-EU Association, programs to eliminate discrimination, promote gender equality, provide expert knowledge on the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, consolidate efforts to combat information war and propaganda.

Problems and Challenges:

- The loss of confidence in non-governmental organizations due to the political crisis of 2014-2015;
- Non-governmental organizations cannot gain a critical mass to influence the state;
- The use by political forces of “manual” (loyal) NGOs organizations to promote interests;
- Polarization of society as one of the tools political forces use to win over the electorate;
- The partnership between the public and civil sectors is usually project-based, which means that cooperation is exhausted after the project is completed;
- Civil society has extremely limited opportunities to influence and push more or anti-corruption reforms, to change the electoral system (before the 2018 parliamentary elections), demonopolization of the media and a number of problems related to the rule of law.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The European Union policy of supporting civil society in the countries of the Eastern Partnership as the core of democratic values requires civil sector to become not only a critic, but eventually a support and a partner for state institutions. To do this, first of all, the civil sector itself should learn to coordinate and establish connections among the organizations themselves and, through consolidation of efforts, influence the policy of the government. The civil sector in all countries of the Eastern Partnership should strive to attract domestic investments, as dependence on international grants does not guarantee sustainability of a number of organizations and projects.

Practical steps in supporting the development of the civil sector at the national level:

- Recognize at the state level the role of civil society as an instrument of public control;
- Create a favorable legal and institutional environment in which civil society can unite the voices of citizens and translate them into national policies and practices;
- Invest in the education of the civil sector:

Invest in the platforms for joint training of civil and public sectors, on the basis of which networks of contacts are created, which is key in coordinating and increasing effectiveness of their activities.

Introduce innovative approaches to activities of the civil sector, given their flexibility. Civil organizations in the Eastern Partnership countries have manifested themselves as an instrument of effective monitoring, combating propaganda and disinformation, and of raising public awareness.

Introduce innovative approaches that civil society uses to public administration practices.

Direct non-governmental organizations to specific activities, that is, to invest in skills development and efficiency (training in project management, budgeting, human resource management, communication and coordination in planning projects and strategies).

