

Matching Words and Deeds:

Enhancing the Role of Civil Society in Building Black Sea Regional Security

Summary of the discussions

The international seminar, organized jointly by the Crisis Management Initiative and the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, took place in Bucharest on 10-11 July, 2007. Its main aim was to give an impetus to civil society's engagement in issues, projects and policies related to the range of hard and soft security threats and challenges in the wider Black Sea area. The meeting was opened by the Adrian Cioroianu, Romania's foreign affairs minister, Kalman Mizsei, EU Special Representative for the Republic of Moldova, dr Antje Herrberg, director at Crisis Management Initiative. Mark Fawcett also presented the message of Peter Semneby, EU Special Representative for South Caucasus, for the Bucharest event. The opening remarks generally underlined the visibility and the recognized importance that the Black Sea region has acquired for the last couple of years and the momentum for engaging in a more active, forward-looking and results-oriented cooperation in the area. The importance of public-private partnerships, within the same country, among countries in the regions and with international institutions and NGO's was a common line of the opening session. The way forward for a secure, democratic, stable and prosperous Black Sea region, cannot be thought of without joining efforts to build a strong and active civil society.

One indisputable added value of the event was that it brought together representatives of the civil society from the countries of the region, as well as officials, representing major international (primarily European) organizations and initiatives and diplomats of the Black Sea countries. They were given an opportunity to establish direct personal contacts with each other, explain the approach of their program / institution / country / NGO towards security and stability in the Black Sea region. The participants were almost unanimous in their positive assessment of need for having such a meeting, stemming from a salience of the problems that confront the region. At the same time, many participants have

expressed a sense of apprehension over whether these contacts will translate into full-grown co-operation rather than into a series of conferences and workshops, with no further results but establishing inter-personal contacts. With the recognition of common challenges, the need for pragmatic cooperation and the availability of several international programs for projects in the region, there was a general optimism that the interest and the opportunity of enhanced cooperation will bear fruits.

The participants to the event have also agreed that a well-planned and thoroughly thought out policy of supporting civil society on the part of international institutions will be of crucial importance for achievement of a common overriding goal: the creation of regional networks which will facilitate sharing experiences, perspectives and project ideas for supporting democratic governance and enhancing societal.

In this process, a particular responsibility lies with the European institutions, which are a part of the wider Black Sea region. Progress in democratic governance as well as in the enhancement of hard and soft security in the area is not only in the interest of all Black Sea countries, but also in the interest of the EU itself.

There has been a general consensus on the security and stability threats in the region, with problems ranging from unresolved conflicts, to proximity with the Middle East, to environmental degradation and adverse demographic trends.

These as well as other specificities of the wider Black Sea region should be duly addressed in regional cooperation initiatives, but also within the framework European new policies and initiatives, among which the current tailor-made European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) Action Plans, the European Neighborhood Partnership Initiative (ENPI), Black Sea Synergy, as well as some others, seem to be the most promising instruments for moving forward.

Another important tool of future partnership was the recent European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), with its Cross Border Cooperation dimension, which will favor economic and social development in the border areas, address common challenges (most notably, protected, secure and efficient borders) and promote people-to-people cooperation. Crucially, this initiative envisages a significant increase of the role of civil society.

The political and economic reform priorities defined in the ENP Action Plans include the empowerment of civil society in order for the latter to exert its direct role as a check on the government and a potential active partner in specific governmental projects. In this regard, at a more technical level, a number of panelists stressed the importance of direct funding of the NGOs and Civil Society groups, rather than passing the funds through the governments. Only if this is the case will the civil society become a fully-fledged stakeholder in the reform process, as it is explicitly mentioned in the “Communication on Strengthening the ENP” document. The presentations and interventions of the participants from the countries of the region where consolidated democracy is yet to firmly take root seemed to be converging with this view.

At the same time, keeping in mind the prospect of networking of civil society bodies within the wider Black Sea region, it is also important to take advantage of the not-so-dissimilar experience of Central and Eastern European states, which walked the path of democratization, economic reforms and Euro-Atlantic integration in the 90s. The framework of cooperation could easily build on the lessons learned from already existing formats that have proven their institutional efficiency, like Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or Partnership and Co-operation Agreements (a precursor of the ENP). A number of participants also mentioned the relevance of the recent Black Sea Synergy Initiative of the European Commission as a relevant tool for stepping up cooperation between the civil society actors in the region and from outside the region.

Cooperation between civil society actors of the EU and EU neighboring countries will also strengthen the so-called “human dimension” of the ENP – people-to-people contacts – one of the crucial components of the Program’s successful implementation.

Several experiences of positive influence, stemming from civil society networking, have been highlighted – like emulation of the Serbian “Otpor” movement in Georgia and Ukraine, which were instrumental in the success of the Rose and Orange revolutions.

The peaceful resolution of the “frozen” conflicts, while preventing them from “becoming hot conflicts”, is the single thorniest problem the region as a whole faces. The conflicts put significant strains on economic growth, inhibit democratic development and absorb vital resources that otherwise could be deployed for achieving other important social

goals. The participants agreed to the common general understanding that there is no “quick fix” to this problem. Therefore, for the time being, the civil societies of the afflicted countries should focus their activities on confidence-building measures, which seem to be the most urgent and promising, under the circumstances. Several panelists cautioned that direct contacts and assistance to civil society actors in the unrecognized secessionist entities may be misused and taken as a legitimizing factor. The issue of engaging and building civil society in unrecognized entities is very sensitive and multifaceted and represents, for the time being, more of an open question than a guideline for action. Further thinking and efforts for finding the best way of dealing with this aspect is greatly needed.

Another noteworthy exchange of opinions was related to the degree to which one can equate civil society with NGOs alone. Referring back to the frozen conflicts’ areas, the risk of dealing with externally or internally supported so-called GONGO’s (*Government-operated non-governmental organizations*), rather than a genuine civil society body, was voiced by some participants.

Certain controversies were voiced around the issues related to co-ordination of efforts of various donors, since the lack of such co-ordination is fraught with duplication and reduction of efficiency in using rather limited funding. The latter issue was also mentioned by several speakers. At the end, there was a general appeal for states in the region, especially those which have a growing economy, to complement EU or non-governmental international funds directed towards improved regional cooperation, in order to achieve concrete and significant results in the Black Sea area.