



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Strengthening the Role of Civil Society in Democratic Governance

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Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Seminar organised by the EU Advisory Group, on the Role of Civil Society in Democratic Governance, Yerevan Armenia

27 September 2012

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'm delighted to be joining you today in Yerevan at the beginning of this high-level seminar. I strongly believe in civil society. In my conception of the Eastern Partnership, civil society organizations are a real driving force as both advocates of change and deliverers of change.

When we collectively established the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum with your colleagues we saw it as serving several objectives – increasing the accountability of what we were trying to do, involving civil society in our cooperation with governments, increasing the diversity of voices being heard, and acting as a bridge between politicians and citizens, giving visibility to the many concrete elements which make up the Eastern Partnership. Whether you agree or disagree with what we are trying to achieve, we ask that you join us in active debate; above all, we want citizens to make informed choices about European integration.

We also look to our friends in civil society to give us a dose of reality. Whether you come from a non-governmental organisation fostering human rights, a think tank, a trade union, an employers' organization or a women's association, there is something in Armenia's co-operation with the European Union, and in the new Agreement which we are negotiating, which will interest you. And only you can tell us how to make it work in the specific context of Armenia.

During his visit to Yerevan earlier this year, The President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy underlined that our joint project - of bringing Armenia closer to the European Union - will only work and will only meet its potential if it is understood and supported by citizens. He asked you to play your role in taking the message to citizens, and I want to support that request.

Of course not all is rosy in the garden, it never is: we are all aware of the challenges ahead which are well-known. They were reflected in the latest European Neighbourhood Policy Progress report, based in part on inputs from non-state actors, from you.

Yet I am happy to hear about positive achievements – Armenia has made very good progress with reforms, and our negotiations of an Association Agreement are going very well.

In this context, it was not difficult to conclude that Armenia deserved further encouragement and earlier this year we were able to allocate an additional €15 million under Eastern Partnership Integration and Cooperation programme (EaPIC) to our bilateral co-operation in the spirit of the "more for more" principle. This money will give a further boost to justice reform and to vocational education and training – two of many areas which will help Armenia to exploit to the full the new opportunities and new market access which we hope our Association will bring.

We will do what we can to maximize European Union support to Armenia, as a catalyst to reform, but we also have a role to play in encouraging a common effort with other development partners such as the World Bank and the International Financial Institutions. This will be a focus in my discussions with government today.

As I said, there is a lot of good news, but there is always something more that we can do. During this visit, I will be speaking to the President, the Prime Minister and other senior colleagues about how to give more focus to our co-operation. We will be sharing what we call a matrix of "priority reform actions" which will be important for Civil Society. It will help you to monitor progress and hold the government to account. We hope it will bring viable changes which stand the test of time. I hope that today's discussions with the government will enable us to finalise the matrix and give it also to you so that you can participate too even if only by monitoring its implementation.

Reforming election standards and processes, enhancing the capacity of Parliament, adopting and implementing the National Human Rights Action Plan, enforcing the anti-corruption strategy, and increasing transparency are just some examples of these priority actions - the aim is to pinpoint the most important short and medium-term measures needed across all areas of our co-operation - political dialogue and reform, foreign and security policy, justice freedom and security, trade, economics and growth, energy and so on.

And I want to reassure you that strengthening the capacity of civil society is one of these priorities. Let me only mention here that it is one of main goals of the newly created Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility, a financial instrument which provides civil society organisations across neighbourhood additional grant support. In parallel we support institutional reforms. Therefore, our focus is also on preparing Armenia's state bodies to take on the challenges which political association and economic integration will bring, and more generally to modernize and focus on the needs of citizens, consumers and users. That is why I am glad that we will be signing, during this mission, an Annual Action Programme which focuses on exactly this kind of institutional support.

I have said a few words about the benefits of association and integration. There is another message which I would like to pass, and it is not an easy one but it is a fundamental one. It concerns the benefits of peace.

I know that this is a very difficult moment for Armenians, and I do not wish to dwell today on the details of recent events. Let me express here today my deep concern and regret for the damage done, both to the peace process and to trust, by the pardon and glorification by some of the crime of Ramil Safarov.

I fully respect the feelings of Armenians, and your right to peacefully express them. At the same time, I insist on calling for restraint, both in words and in actions. We have to keep working for peace; because only with a foundation of peace and stability will the other goals we are striving towards have lasting value.

Armenia's fulfilment of its enormous potential depends upon a sense of medium to long-term stability and predictability. This can only be achieved by elimination of the threat of conflict. There is no other way. In this respect I want to pay special tribute to those civil society organizations who work on confidence building in Nagorno-Karabakh. This is priceless work which must continue, however difficult the environment.

Dear friends, I sense a vibrant and flourishing civil society in Armenia. I am glad about this because you have a lot of work ahead of you. Armenian citizens expect you to monitor the progress of reform, to demand accountability, and to bring your expertise and realism to the table.

Whether your expertise is in labour rights, migration or children's issues, the business climate, we need you. We expect you to share with us your knowledge and your experience of the development of legislation and institutions here in Armenia, on the challenges to approximate to European Union standards and norms. That is a core ingredient of the monitoring role, in which you provide your valuable expertise to the European Union as well as to your own stakeholders. In this context, make sure you use to full extent the powerful mandate you have been given in Warsaw to monitor the implementation of the Roadmap that will guide us towards the next Eastern Partnership Summit in November 2013 in Vilnius.

When it comes to your activities in the field, we want to know what is going on outside the capital as well, in the regions and among isolated or disadvantaged groups including minorities. I hope this ambition will be encompassed by your debate at this conference on "How to enhance the relevance of civil society", but it also fits very much into the framework of the discussion you will have on "civil society as an agent of change".

I'm glad that meetings have taken place between the Civil Society Forum National Platform and representatives of the government, and I strongly encourage both parties to develop these into a structured and permanent dialogue. And of course I will continue to fight for the legal protection of the independence of civil society across the Eastern Partnership, so that you can, as the saying goes, "speak truth unto power".

Distinguished panellists, Ladies and gentlemen, I look forward to hearing the outcome of your proceedings. I very much welcome that you have committed to provide concrete recommendations and I hope you will not hesitate to share them with me. I expect your support in the development of the initiatives I have mentioned today, and in return you can expect my solidarity and attention. I wish you an excellent conference and I hope to see most of you in Stockholm in November at the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

Thank you.