

Sharing the Experiences of Visegrad Cooperation in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership Countries

Interregional Workshop
on
the Role of Civil Society Organizations
in Regional Cooperation

Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 17-19 November 2010

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Notes¹ on and from the „Sharing the Experiences of Visegrad Cooperation in the Western Balkans and the EaP with special focus on GUAM Countries, Interregional Workshop on the role of Civil Society Organizations in Regional Cooperation” organised by ICDT in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 17-19 November 2010

ICDT has organised an interregional workshop called “Sharing the Experiences of Visegrad Cooperation in the Western Balkans and the EaP/ GUAM Countries” Interregional Workshop on the role of Civil Society Organizations in Regional Cooperation that took place Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 17-19 November 2010.

Mirroring the goal of the project above as applied to a specific field, the objective of the workshop was threefold:

First, ICDT presented well-defined achievements and lessons learned of Visegrad cooperation in the field of civil society in the context of EU integration and membership.

Second, participants analyzed the applicability of these experiences in light of current challenges and opportunities in the Western Balkans and the EaP countries in selected policy areas.

¹ The notes, however much aiming for objectivity, express a subjective perspective of the event. When preparing these notes, minutes and comments of several participants were used which are highly appreciated by the organisers. Speakers have shared their presentation on <http://interregional.icdt.hu/en/events> .Thanks need to be expressed for this collaborative effort.

Finally, the discussion in working groups focused on identifying common solutions, best practices and recommendations for further cooperation among these regions and civil societies or within them.

Besides the level of expertise of participants, a food-for-thought paper² was circulated before the event to help identify specific key issues to shape a fruitful discussion.

The event gathered representatives of civil society from the EU member states, Western Balkan and EAP/GUAM (namely Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) countries as well as donors and different regional agencies active in the region besides national governments officials. The participants actively debated the state of affairs and took advantage of this event for networking and benchmarking progress made in each country in the region in terms of civil society development and regional exchanges. The event has shown the value of such gatherings and participants have expressed interest in continuing and advancing this kind of work.

This memo is to follow the line of the three aims of the event and provides the highlights of the gathering with the focus on potential further development.

Achievements and lessons learned of Visegrad cooperation in the field of civil society in the context of EU integration and membership and the applicability of the different experiences

The importance of CSOs has been recognized in the Commission's Communication "Civil Society Dialogue between the EU and Candidate Countries" (June 2005³), as having increasingly important role in the pre-accession process and in accelerating the EU integration.

Participants and speakers of the Sarajevo workshop all agreed that the political and socio-economic reforms ongoing in the WB and EaP countries require an active involvement of various stakeholders, including the civil society organisations. A strong and well functioning civil society is a core element of a democratic society, having an important role in expressing the citizen aspirations by encouraging their participation and raising awareness for their needs, demands and rights.

The lessons learned and challenges faced by the Visegrád Four (V4) countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.) by 2010 were drafted in a paper before the event for the purposes of bringing about discussion on the opportunities that could occur for regional and interregional cooperation to benefit the Western Balkans and the EaP /GUAM Countries. In addition to the food

² Available at <http://interregional.icdt.hu/en/events>

³ See http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/enlargement/ongoing_enlargement/e50022_en.htm, **Communication** from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, of 29 June 2005, **on civil society dialogue between the European Union and candidate countries** [COM(2005) 290 final - Not published in the Official Journal]

for though paper some of the participants have come from the V4 as well as other EU member states to add their personal experience.

It was clear that the meaning of an NGO and civil society is more or less the same for the V4 countries which is not necessarily the same in the other countries. In the V4 development efforts of the early 1990s have focused mostly on working with organizations while in the WB and EAP/GUAM countries putting emphasis on local community development, often informal structures is not unusual. Formal and informal civil society is active in all segments of life: education, health care, social services, sports, recreation, research, environment, development and housing, advocacy, business and professional work, unions, philanthropy to name a few.

While over the years, the overall establishment and sustainability of the civil society sector has been consolidated and it seems to stagnate in the V4 region with some variation in certain areas, it is not necessarily the same for WB and EAP/GUAM countries.

The main weakness of the not-for-profit sector in Central Europe is its financial viability that has its effects on the quality of human resources, the issue based as well as overall sectoral interest representation, the public image and perception of organisations, the transparency of organisations and decision making mechanisms, the independence of the sector, and also its absorbing capacity of accession, post-accession and other substantial financial opportunities, to name a few challenges.

Generous support of NGOs in the V4 and beyond by some West European, Japanese and particularly US grantmaking institutions was a very important revenue source of the early 1990s in the V4 civil society. It was assumed that domestic private (corporate, individual and foundation philanthropy) would gradually replace foreign funding. However, years after the introduction of democracy and market economy, many NGOs in the V4 are still heavily dependent on foreign funding, especially pro-democracy, human rights, minority protection, advocacy, watchdog and monitoring groups, as well as public policy institutes and think tanks. The expectation of the early foreign private funders and aid agencies supporting the transition to democracy was that with the EU membership their presence in the V4 will be replaced by new mechanisms, and financial assistance which did not fully materialize. In reality, a gap was left behind in the support mechanisms of civil society organizations in the V4, especially for institutional development and pro-democracy work while in some other areas, like employment structures, multi-year substantial financing of a range of project has become a reality. If well prepared, the WB and EAP/GUAM region may be able not to follow the same route, and can develop strategies to sustain the development of the nonprofit sectors and develop means for sustainability of civil organizations even for those years when foreign support and aid is shrinking for key areas of democracy building.

At the same time in the V4 several new local and national funding mechanisms were brought to life using creatively the new environment. Many of the new funding models are worth the examination



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(the National Civil Fund in Hungary, the percentage “philanthropy” in several countries, the local government local tax use for civil society support, community foundations model, CSR etc.) **There are several lessons in this regards that the V4 can present from different means of direct state support grant schemes and tax benefits to NGOs to the development of private philanthropy by donors forums, non-profit information centers to name a few.**

The participants have expressed interest regarding this type of know-how exchange.

The revenue structure of the not-for-profit sector in the V4 is different from the old democracies' and its challenges are different too. As a general rule, one can say that in the V4, the share of private giving (that is, individual, corporate and foundation-based philanthropy) remains low. As a result, many civil organisations tend to rely on self generated income resulting in more service-oriented sectors. As an alternative, reliance on public support (government and local government sources) is most frequent, often resulting in political alliances between organisations, leaders and political actors.

The appearance of EU funds have influenced the work of many organisations not only because of the unusual large amounts of financial contribution of EU and related sources (for a limited number of organisations) but also for setting up new organisational practices (e.g. of planning, administering, monitoring, reporting, disseminating project plans and results). Among the side effects of the EU grants is, for example, a higher level of expectation regarding the transparent decision making and public participation. In many countries projects were initiated and procedures set up by coalitions of organizations for better involvement of citizens and organizations in local and national level decision making. The conviction, for example, that citizens should have the opportunity to influence the way the resources available under the European funds are distributed, resulted in the CEE Bankwatch Network development of a project on Public Participation in EU Funds addressing the “concept of public participation”, i.e. the involvement of citizens in decisions on spending public money from the EU funds like the structural funds, the Cohesion Fund and the pre-accession funds (ISPA, SAPARD).

Serious interest has been expressed at the event regarding such participatory models and more broadly, the dynamics and structures of state and not-for-profit-sector dialogues and working relations. There is plenty of experience regarding schemes guiding civil dialogue (both in the government and among the CSO community) in the V4 and in some other countries too. For example in Macedonia, the Strategy for Cooperation of the Government with the Civil Society (January, 2007) provides a base for setting structures and process for civil dialogue. The exchange of information on the experience of such mechanisms (e.g. enabling the access to draft laws, the level of involvement of NGOs in law making, public debates, hearings etc).

Although such involvement is encouraged by the EU, in many countries no mechanism has been established for regular, timely and substantial involvement of the civil society organizations in the drafting and approximation of the national development plans, the operational programs and the



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accompanying strategic documents. Besides the Partnership principle laid down in the IPA Implementing Rules on consultations with the civil sector, the involvement of civil society organizations tend to be more ceremonial than substantial.

Participants highly welcomed the expressed support of some agencies whose priorities may (or not) be civil society and realise the value of this sector and work for and/or with this third sector organisation, like the RCC Liaison Office in Brussels, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), GUAM Organization for Democracy and Development and the Swiss Cooperation Office for the South Caucasus.

Participants agreed that the work of the CSOs can prove crucial in determining the pace and quality of the accession process, as well as generating public support for the accession and therefore should be a priority.

Meanwhile, the EU accession process should be viewed as a window of opportunity for NGOs, which, if used well, can create lasting value for the development of civil society in these regions. This is why the experience of the V4 is so important and asks for further elaboration and exchange of experience and know how.

Common solutions, best practices and recommendations for further cooperation among these regions and civil societies or within them

The aim of ICDT was also to pinpoint some concrete areas that participants believe to be an applicable model from the V4 in their region to advance civil society development.

Interest has been expressed regarding several areas, such as:

- **Civil society and state relations** (mechanisms for structured dialogue between state and civil society, the levels of collaboration, the direct financial support via grant schemes as well as tax benefits to NGOs)
- The experience of countries where there is a **civil society development strategy** of the government
- Means, methods, techniques regarding **the development of private philanthropy** (e.g. donors forums, percentage philanthropy, Czech privatization resources dedicated to endowments, etc.)
- **The experience of the Polish NGO Office in Brussels that was established in 2001** with a stated objective of „provision of information to Polish NGOs regarding issues of interest to the third sector and related to Poland's prospective EU membership; facilitating membership of Polish NGOs in European networks”

- **Different participatory models and more broadly, the dynamics and structures of state and not-for-profit-sector dialogues and working relations.**
- **The involvement of national and ethnic minorities** of the region in civil society.
- Conflict resolution and trust building measures. On a grass root level big countries shouldn't be involved.
- **Modeling NGO resource portals**, website for the region (e.g. civic.md, nonprofit.hu, klon.pl, etc.)
- To be able to measure development stocktaking and benchmark of civil society is needed to be able to compare results, i.e. **the need for common well defined civil society research** is present (the example of the Johns Hopkins Comparative research)
- **Community Development**, regardless of political changes, the social problems are completely similar. This is the field where sharp political questions can be avoided.
- Even the case of some **concrete organizations** is valid for know-how exchange like
 - the Environmental Partnership that is “Nurturing a healthy environment and civil society from the grassroots” in the V4 plus Romania and Bulgaria, that not only continued their operation but even enlarged their scope in recent years.
 - the experience of the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence regarding the role of civil society in regional conflict resolution
 - the practice of the Carpathian Foundation in Ukraine reagrding embedding civil society in social processes

Most debate has followed the panel on supporting civil society, where panelists included Mr. Petr Vagner, Director of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), Ms. Lidija Arsova, Executive Officer of the Central European Initiative and Ms. Ana Aelenei, Program Officer at the Black Sea Trust for Regional

The model of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) has been presented and generated input regarding the feasibility of similar funding and cooperating mechanisms in the given regions.

The IVF was founded by the governments of the countries of the [Visegrad Group](#) to facilitate and promote the development of closer cooperation among V4 countries (and of V4 countries with other countries, especially but not exclusively non-EU member states in Eastern Europe, the

Western Balkans and the South Caucasus) through the support of common cultural, scientific and educational projects, youth exchanges, cross-border projects and tourism promotion.”⁴

The budget of the Fund (€6 million as of 2010) consists of equal contributions of the Visegrad Group's governments. The Fund runs the following programs: three [grant programs](#) (Small/Standard/Strategic Grants), three [scholarship schemes](#), [artist residencies](#) and a [curriculum-building program for universities](#). Besides NGOs, municipalities and local or regional governments, schools and universities, but also private companies and individual citizens from the Visegrad Group countries (and other countries) are eligible for the Fund's support. In the case of small and standard grants, projects supported by the IVF projects with the exception of cross-border cooperation, entities from at least three Visegrad Group (V4) countries participate and organize activities on a variety of areas of civil life, as in the areas of cultural cooperation, scientific exchange and research, education, youth exchange, cross-border cooperation and promotion of tourism or “any field of activity (e.g. ecology, social affairs, sports and leisure, media, etc.)”⁵ The Visegrad Strategic Program is more focused on supporting long-term projects of strategic character that link institutions of all four Visegrad Group countries matching the priorities defined by the [Conference of Ministers](#) for the given year following the foreign policy priorities of the [Presidency of the Visegrad Group](#), for example: [V4 Response to the Decade of Roma Inclusion](#), [Building a Green Visegrad](#), [Sharing V4 Know-how with Neighbouring Regions](#) and [V4 Promotion](#). While small grants add to the better understanding and cooperation of regional actors especially on the grass roots level, the strategic grants result in thorough development of areas of mutual concern..

Discussion has taken place regarding the applicability of the model in two regional working sessions: the Western Balkans working session and the EaP/GUAM working session. Both working groups have agreed that the IVF is a forerunner in regional development and the funding initiative developed as a collaboration of participating states is an outstanding model.

However positive the example of the IVF for the Visegrad region is, the participants of the EaP session were hesitant to say whether the EaP region is ready for such a funding mechanism yet. Hope was expressed that civil society organizations and local communities would be willing and eager to work together on a regional level and indeed, it is something that most would like to see flourishing. At the same time, the reality is that the foreign relations of the countries in the region highly affect the potential of such exchanges. It was agreed by the participants of the working groups that further research, investigation, brainstorming is needed.

Meanwhile, participants of the Western Balkan Workshop have thought that the WB region would need such a fund and the applicability of the model (as presented at the plenary) is most likely. Its strong advantage, beyond generating resources from national governments for civil society issues,

⁴ <http://www.visegradfund.org/about.html>

⁵ <http://www.visegradfund.org/grants.html>

is its creative application of regional and local perspectives. The fact that emphasis is given to civil society in the target sector of the fund is highly appreciated by the participants.

Regarding the concrete applicability of an IVF like mechanism, ICDT has expressed the need for a feasibility study. Participants of the workshop have expressed several ideas and points for further consideration that can be important during a feasibility and strategic planning of a “WBFund”, among them:

- “Small NGOs should not be forgotten and on the contrary, we should make sure that small and medium size NGOs are supported”
- “WBF should be in all national languages.”
- “WBF should have at least three components:
 - 1. Knowledge exchange, NGOs can learn from each other
 - 2. Communication tools how to sell success stories of the CSO sector, CSOs are actors
 - 3. Institutional grants and provide support to secure liquidity of NGOs”
- “The event or activities should not be the only criteria, but NGOs should apply with their yearly plans.”
- “WB should help advocate accession of the region”

ICDT has expressed its commitment to the “WBF” vision by offering the facilitation of the drafting of a feasibility study where the need for involving actors from the governmental and non-governmental sectors on local, national and regional level in this process is clear. ICDT has appreciated the input of the workshop and plans to keep the participants informed about the drafting process.

The event closed with much food for thought for participants and organiser to take home and has highlighted several points of further elaboration on bilateral and regional levels as well as on inter-regional level.