

**WG2 and WG5 Annual Meeting – Report**  
15 and 16 May 2018, Pentahotel, Brussels (Belgium)

**DAY 1 – 15 May 2018**

**Opening session**

Steering Committee (SC) members and WG2 and WG5 coordinators Laura Dittel and Goda Neverauskaite opened the meeting and presented the agenda. They insisted on the recommendations to EU stakeholders that are expected to be produced by the end of the meeting.

Sabit Baghirov, coordinator of the WG2, and Raisa Liparteliani, coordinator of WG5, continued the opening remarks.

**Introduction, Part 1: new EaP architecture and the Forum's role in it + Presentation of the relevant Platform and Panels work plan and activities**

Lidia Gromadzka, from the EaP CSF Secretariat, addressed the revised EaP CSF architecture and the Forum's role in it as the only civil society actor recognized by the EU institutions. EaP platforms and panels were presented as unique opportunities to participate in the meetings between EaP countries and the EU officials and Member States, and display civil society expertise. The need for further alignment of the Forum's structures with the new architecture was also explained.

During the Q&A, members asked whether the European Commission (EC) is willing to give time to EaP CSF to present our input at platforms and panels meetings. The Secretariat replied that the EU counterparts seem more and more committed to include our representatives in the conversation, on an equal basis as other participants. One of the members also commented that he represented the Forum at one of the meetings and he had time to present the output, and that participation was facilitated.

Vera Rihackova, from the Secretariat, presented the main outcomes from the platforms and panels meetings that already took place and that our members attended as Forum representatives, and mainly focused on the Forum's participation in Platform 2.

Many questions were raised on the database of members used for identification of the CSF representatives at the EaP Platforms and panels during the Q&A. Members asked for more transparency of the database and its accessibility to both the national platforms and the working groups. Members suggested that the people in the database should provide at least one public publication to prove their expertise and express views they have on the topics of the meeting they expect to attend. At the same time, published articles can be an obstacle for experts that do have expertise, but don't publish articles under own name (or do so in their own language, rather than English or Russian). Members also raised the issue of short notice for the dates of the meetings.

The Secretariat reacted by proposing to create a comprehensive calendar, combining all upcoming the meetings and events together (as far as such information is available), and publish it on the Forum's website. They also asked members to bear in mind that sometimes the Forum receives invitations for the meetings at a short notice and that it is not possible to open a call for experts a month in advance, although ideally this should be the case. They assured that the process is as transparent as possible taking into account the limited amount of time and the numerous events taking place in parallel. The fact that external experts can sign up in the database, which is good for attracting new members, was positively highlighted. The Secretariat was also concerned about GDPR compliance if the data from the expert database is made public. However, the consensus reached was that as much as possible under the new strict data privacy laws, the database will be available on the website. It was published on 23 May and is available under [this link](#), together with the calendar of upcoming Platforms and Panels meetings.

Among other proposals raised by members, some asked for translating all the presentations to the national languages of the EaP countries. On this, the Secretariat reminded that the official languages of the meetings are only English and Russian.

Goda Neverauskaite summarized the first part of the session. She stressed that it is necessary to discuss further on the expert database and who has access to it. It was underlined the selection procedure has to be effective, transparent but also as simple as possible since it is very heavy administratively.

### **Introduction, Part 2: communications and visibility strategy + upcoming internal reform**

Vera Rihackova elaborated on regranting stressing that for the first time, this year there was a selection committee per working group (WG2 and WG5 projects were evaluated together due to rather low number of proposals) composed of WG Coordinator and two external experts. DG NEAR was a new element in the selection process as they requested to give the final approval of the proposals. Two projects were selected for WG2 and the same amount for WG5. The projects that are pending to be approved by the EC are not those from WG2 or WG5 but WG1. Unfortunately, due to this delay on the approval, projects have not started yet. Consequently, the Forum will make sure that the implementation period is extended into 2019 so the projects can be fully developed. The signing of the 2018-2020 grant for the Forum affects the process as there is no money to transfer for the projects.

Members asked how this situation happened and why signing the grant takes so long. The Secretariat answered that the main problem in the discussions is the definition of the nature of the Forum and its independence from EU institutions. The Steering Committee already decided to take position on this and sent a letter to Commissioner Hahn.

Some members made negative comments on EU's engagement with Azerbaijan and the supposedly lack of interest on funding civil society in the country. Members called the SC to take some measures. The Secretariat informed that a statement on this issue has been already released and that the Delegation of the EU to Azerbaijan provided the response. Goda Neverauskaite added that the Forum has already received feedback from the EC and that the meeting with Commissioner's Hahn Cabinet is a first step.

On regranting, members had concerns on the procedures and asked the Secretariat and the SC to work for improving communication with national platforms. Some members raised the issue of Georgian-led projects not being selected for regranting and the need to include the geographical factor in the selection. Both the Secretariat and other members stated that it is more important to have quality projects and that the selection process was transparent according to criteria stated in the call and selection procedure approved by the Steering Committee.

Both the Secretariat and WG Coordinators confirmed that no project delivered after deadline was eligible for regranting. The selection procedure will be reviewed again this year. The information provided for the selection was transparent and all the criteria were included in the public call for proposals. On the geographic factor, it could be examined by the Steering Committee. On National Platforms, starting 2019 they will be receiving EUR 50,000 each for operational support and for bringing more cooperation at national level and building linkages. At the same time, the NPs will have to comply with minimum standards and visibility guidelines.

Darya Mustafayeva presented the communication strategy, which included links between the Secretariat and National Platforms. Ideally, messages should be multiplied by every NP. It is important to make visible the participation of the EaP CSF in every EaP platform and panel meeting. Everyone should comply with the visibility guidelines that the Secretariat provides when a regranting project is assigned. She asked members to share with the Secretariat all their content, including statements and other documents produced at national level.

One of the re-grantees raised the issue of sharing the project's social media posts in another language than English or Russian by the Secretariat. The Secretariat committed to review the content shared on this specific project. Other members proposed to shorten the visibility guide, and expressed the need for a more concise and less frequent e-mail correspondence with the Secretariat. They stressed that not every organization can hire a communications officer and raised concerns about the lack of financial assistance received by the national platforms.

As a last point on the agenda of this part of the meeting, Laura Dittel elaborated on the internal reform. She said that two experts were hired and developed proposals presented at the Steering Committee meeting in Minsk in April 2018. They have received comments from the SC, based on which further proposals will be elaborated.

On internal reform, members asked how the outlined changes will affect the role of WG5 in the new EaP architecture and the number of delegates from WG5 to the Annual Assembly adopted at the Steering Committee meeting in Minsk in April 2018. On the point of Annual Assembly, Goda Neverauskaite reminded that it was the last day to apply and encouraged members to do so.

In this regard, some members raised the issue of conflicting commitments on the dates of the Annual Assembly (notably the ITUC Congress and COP24 in Katowice) and proposed to change the dates. Other members asked for an extension of the application deadline if the dates are changed.

### **Brainstorming on messages: work in small groups**

#### **Youth unemployment, labour market and professional education**

Members present: Nugzar Kokhreidze, Kristina Rikhter, Andrzej Adamczyk, Siarhei Antusevich, Dzmitry Babicki, Laura Dittel, Valerii Riepin, Svitlana Vnuchko, Nukri Kvelashvili

The group developed the following messages in the context of the upcoming EaP Youth Conference in Vienna that were further refined during the advocacy and communications training:

- The EaP countries should introduce the legal regulation of internships in order to ensure fair competition among businesses and stop the abuse of young workers.
- The EaP countries should introduce positive employment quotas for young workers and a system of incentives, including tax incentives in order to combat youth unemployment.
- The EaP countries should promote strong links between the labour market needs and vocational training, including potential establishment of a dual education system.
- The EU should promote the conclusion of bilateral agreements on labour migration and/or social security between the EU Member States and EaP countries.
- The EU should support the EaP countries in promoting a just economic transition and creating decent jobs.

#### **Group on Business Climate and SMEs**

Members present: Gunta Misane, Merabi Kakulia, Samir Aliyev, Bekar Burchuladze, Angela Chicu, Nino Elizbarashvili, Ilgar Huseynli, Gayane Poghosyan, Vugar Bayramov.

Although acknowledging that most of the steps towards further harmonisation of business environment in EaP countries to EU standards and praxis are in the hands of governments and businesses in EaP countries, group participants wanted to draw EU attention to several initiatives that could considerably help business support organisations and enterprises to be better prepared for closer relations with EU:

- Encouraging governments of EaP countries to adopt enterprise classification accepted throughout the EU. There is a lack of general consensus across EaP and EU on the definition of SMEs. An improved understanding of the status of SMEs in EaP countries and their role in the economy would provide better basis for stronger government support to SMEs.
- Supporting further exchange of best practices between EU and EaP entrepreneurs and business support organisations (and among EaP) on innovative business practices, support to women in business, starting business etc.
- Providing highly qualified technical assistance to advise EaP governments and municipal organisations on transparency in distribution of grants, managing EU and governmental support

programmes, transparency in procurements, drafting legislation on business specific issues, among other topics.

**Group on Harmonization of Digital Markets (HDM):**

Present: Davit Tsiskaridze, Olga Chyzhova, Anton Leppik, Karen Chilingaryan, Vasyl Shylov

During the discussion, the group members analyzed the final version of the Work Programme (2018-2020) of Platform 2 against the suggestions sent by the EaP CSF on 13 March. The following recommendations were included into the work programme of Platform 2:

- Harmonized roaming pricing and reduced roaming tariffs among the Partner Countries by at least 10% - roaming discussions with the EU2 launched
- To set up an e-Competence Framework in EaP partner countries. This would provide a reference for 40 competences applied in the IT sector, using a common language for competences, skills, knowledge and proficiency levels that can be understood across Europe. An e-Competence Framework will help to develop the system of standards under the European e-Competence Framework umbrella. This would enable the identification of skills and competences that may be required to successfully perform duties and fulfil responsibilities related to the IT workplace.
- Platform should provide guidance on the creation of digital infrastructure building blocks in the Eastern Partnership countries, to ensure the three main instruments in addressing the elimination of existing obstacles and barriers to pan-European online services; cross-border e-Signatures, electronic trade and Digital Transport Corridor services.

However, some of the submitted recommendations have still not be taken into account by the EU. While also further developing and refining some of the recommendations, members of the group reiterated the importance of the following:

- To recommend the governments of EaP countries to improve governance and coordination by:
  - elaboration of countries' HDM policies, strategies and development of action plans;
  - creation of national roadmaps proposed for promoting HDM ecosystem development in EaP;
- To call to responsible Ministries of EaP countries to implement of unperformed obligation of AA in EaP countries (Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova). In particular: Georgia has to implement the provisions of this Sub-Section Liability of intermediary service providers Article 129-133 within two years from the date of entry into force of this agreement, but unfortunately it hasn't been done yet;
- Establishing of national digital skills & jobs coalition in EaP countries except for Armenia, using as a basis on the EU's digital skills & jobs coalition model;
- The cross-cutting deliverable on 'Structured Engagement with Civil Society' could be reflected in 'ICT Innovation and Start-up Ecosystems', by adding the involvement of stakeholders from the civil society sector;
- The work of the HDM Panel should provide a perspective looking towards a withdrawal of EaP countries from the influence of Russian hosting and domains, since many enterprises and

individuals use services of Russian operators. Especially in the context of increasingly stringent sanctions against Russia, there is a risk that in the future there may be restrictions on Russia's access to global digital technologies, including its complete disconnection from global internet. This would negatively influence the development of EaP digital markets;

- Social and labor dimension of HDM development:
  - To conduct an assessment of the social impacts of HDM development on workers and population;
  - to avoid digitalisation further splitting society into a few winners and many losers and contributing to an even more unequal distribution of wealth;

### **AA/CEPA implementation: Lessons learned and best practices in involving civil society in monitoring AA/CEPA implementation**

Members present: Viorel Chivriga, Mariam Grigalashvili, Iryna Kosse, Alexandru Platon, Naira Arakelyan, Goda Neverauskaite, Sergiu Sainciuc

The group developed the following messages that were further refined during the advocacy and communications training:

- Need of awareness raising campaigns on AA/DCFTAs and CEPA in rural areas and regions since there is lack of understanding and information; messages and messengers should be picked very carefully, and the messages should be tailored to the regional context
- Transposition of the legislation is taking place but there is lack of implementation practice – the process and (civil society) monitoring should focus on quality results not quantitative indicators
- Good practices should be presented – GE website ([aa.ge](http://aa.ge)) and UA websites, MD projects – these are good examples of monitoring and making the results accessible to the whole society and especially media.
- There should be clear criteria for creating civil society groups and platforms and there should be an approach on how to better synergize the work of these bodies.
- EU Delegations should organise discussions with the civil society before publishing the AA/DCFTA and CEPA implementation reports.
- Technical assistance to AA/DCFTA countries – the experts and advisors should be selected carefully, with focus on complying with clear criteria like knowledge of the country context and actual expertise.

### **DAY 2 - 16 May**

The members followed one of the following **trainings**:

1. Communications: how to successfully tailor a message to an EU-specific audience/stakeholders
2. Introduction to Brussels decision-making process and EU institutions
3. Writing successful project proposals for grants

### **Meeting with external stakeholders**

Meeting with **Maxime Bablon, International relations officer responsible for Platform 2 at DG for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs**

The session was attended mostly by members of the groups on SMEs/business climate, HDM, and AA/CEPA implementation. The meeting was facilitated by Gunta Misane, WG2 member, and started by members presenting the results of the work done in groups on the previous day. Afterwards, the discussion revolved around the Work Programmes of Platform 2 and its Panels, and spanned from business conditions for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), access to funding, and technical assistance, to public procurement.

More specifically, members noted that the criteria for the definition of SMEs are different in the EU and in the EaP region and called on the EU to promote a harmonization of the classification criteria defining SMEs. A point was also made about the need for EU assistance in improving the business climate for SMEs, including provisions on bankruptcy and second chance for SMEs.

Some members called for better and more tailored EU technical assistance, provided by experts selected transparently and knowledgeable of the country they are assisting, and not just of their specific sector.

Finally, a member noted the difficulty in accessing funding for female entrepreneurship when such funding is redistributed by the state and recommended to foresee direct access to funding in this sector.

Mr Bablon was receptive to the comments and stated that he will share the remarks with his colleagues in DG Grow.

### **Meeting with *Frédérique Rychener, DG Employment***

During the meeting the members of the youth unemployment, labor market and professional education group presented and further developed on the messages from the working session. The main concerns raised were on the skills mismatch in the EaP countries where the majority of the population receives university degrees focusing on the theoretical knowledge while many employers require practical skills, including organizational and communication ones. The representative of the DG Employment warned against directly replicating the dual education system and other systems applied in the EU countries without considering the realities on the ground. The legal guarantees of the quality of internships is another field that needs improvement and where the EU framework and experience could be used. A number of ways to address the brain drain from the EaP countries were discussed with a focus on creating decent jobs.

### **Closing session**

The session was moderated by Sabit Baghirov, WG2 Coordinator, and Goda Neverauskaite, WG5 Coordinator. Participants discussed the statement prepared by WG5 members regarding the foreseen distribution of WGs in the upcoming AA2018 selection process, as well as the timing of the event. It was decided that the draft will be finalized online and translated into English, before being submitted to the EaP CSF Steering Committee. In connection to that, a member expressed regret that there is no sub-platform for WG5-related issues in the new EaP architecture, and that the role of WG5 is diminishing.

Sabit Baghirov replied that WG5 was not created at the same time as other WGs and for a while members working on WG5-related issues were part of WG2.

Participants also shared their remarks about the new format of the event. While overall evaluated positively, members requested to consider more Russian-speaking sessions and inviting more external stakeholders. The Secretariat replied that indeed more stakeholders were targeted (notably from the European Commission), but some of them were not available to join the meeting at the time it was taking place. Another member suggested to dedicate part of the agenda to the possibility of one delegate per country reporting to other members on the situation in each country. Lastly, members requested to receive the presentations from the meeting, which the Secretariat promised to sent around, together with a link to subscribe to the database used to nominate Forum representatives at official Platforms and Panels meetings.

**Key results of the meeting:**

- Several messages were developed that will guide the Forum’s work in the following specific areas:
  - o In the context of the upcoming EaP Youth Conference in Vienna in November, the group came up with joint solutions for improving the working conditions in the EaP countries, especially those for young people, addressing the brain drain, creating decent jobs and developing a coherent legal framework in the EaP countries and through bilateral EU-EaP agreements.
  - o In the context of the upcoming informal ministerial in Minsk in June on digital economy, members of the Harmonization of Digital Markets group developed concrete recommendations, basing the input on previous work already done by Forum members.
  - o Having in mind the upcoming CEPA and the civil society role in monitoring of its implementation, members from AA states shared with their Armenian colleagues major issues and best practices in successful implementation of the association agenda.
  - o When focusing on business climate and SMEs, members developed recommendations to EU stakeholders on further support to their EaP counterparts on approximation of the SMEs legislation. They shared best practices on key issues such as promoting women in business and innovation, and asked for more technical cooperation to build capacities on transparency when managing EU grants.
- Further refining the messages developed, 25 Forum members were trained in key areas of the Forum’s work and contacts with EU stakeholders – advocacy and communication. Another 15 attended a workshop devised to help with grant writing. In total, 40 Forum members improved their skills.
- Members successfully used the occasion of the meeting with the external stakeholders to already pass the messages developed, and to receive further information helping to better target the EU stakeholders.