



European Economic and Social Committee

REX – External Relations

The EESC and the Eastern European Neighbours and Russia





The EESC and the Eastern European Neighbours

The EESC's aim is to involve civil society organisations in the dialogue between the EU and the European Eastern Neighbours. The EESC believes that dialogue and the exchange of experiences between civil society representatives on both sides can make a strong contribution to the implementation of the EU's external policy in the region.

The EU's external policy towards Eastern Europe consists of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the EU-Russia Strategic Partnership ⁽¹⁾, that are complemented by the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea Synergy initiatives ⁽²⁾.

The Eastern Neighbours Contact Group is the EESC body responsible for relations with civil society in these countries.

The EESC's main objectives in the region are:

- To promote involvement of civil society in the Eastern Partnership initiative, and in particular, to play a key role in setting up the Civil Society Forum.
- To help civil society organisations in the Black Sea region to raise their profile and contribute to the transformation of the region.
- To strengthen participation of organised civil society in the implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy National Action Plans, and in the negotiations of upcoming association agreements to be concluded between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries.
- To contribute to the consolidation of civil society organisations in the Eastern European countries and Russia,

and to strengthen the capacity of stakeholders to influence national decision-making mechanisms.

- Over time, to establish permanent structures for dialogue and cooperation between the EESC and organised civil society in the countries of the region.

Eastern Partnership

The Eastern Partnership aims to strengthen and upgrade relations between the EU and its Eastern neighbours. In 2009, the EESC drew up an exploratory opinion, requested by the Czech Presidency of the EU, on the civil society involvement in this initiative.

In March 2009, the EESC in cooperation with the International Labour Office organised a joint conference on "Civil society in the Black Sea region and the Eastern Partnership countries – promoting civil and social dialogue". The event was attended by representatives of employers, employees and various interests organisations from the EU Member States as well as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine.

Participants in the conference called for civil society to be fully involved in the activities of the Eastern Partnership and for a prominent role for the EESC in the Civil Society Forum.

Black Sea Synergy

In 2008, the EESC drew up an exploratory opinion on "Setting up civil society organisations networks in the Black Sea region", requested by Commissioner Ferrero Waldner, in response to the Commission's new regional cooperation

⁽¹⁾ The Eastern Partnership refers to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus (at technical level only), Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

⁽²⁾ The Black Sea Synergy refers to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine.



initiative to create a Black Sea Synergy among ten countries in the region. The EESC aims to enhance network building among social partners and non-governmental organisations in the region as a contribution to the civil society dimension of the initiative.

Ukraine

The EESC has established contacts with Ukrainian civil society and in 2005 organised a conference on “Connecting EU-Ukraine civil society: facing challenges and finding opportunities in the framework of the EU-Ukraine Action Plan”. The Committee also maintains regular contacts with its Ukrainian counterpart – the National Tripartite Social and Economic Council (NTSEC).

The EESC adopted an opinion on “EU-Ukraine relations: a new dynamic role for civil society” in September 2008. The opinion makes a number of concrete proposals on how to involve Ukrainian civil society in the European integration process.

In October 2008, a conference on the involvement of the civil society in EU-Ukraine relations was organised together with NTSEC, and other Ukrainian civil society representatives. Participants adopted proposals on the establishment of an EU-Ukraine civil society joint body that would become part of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. The EESC supports the establishment of such a joint body and is actively working toward the achievement of this objective.

Moldova

The EESC adopted an opinion on “The EU’s relations with Moldova: What role for organised civil society?” in 2007. A study visit to Chisinau was organised to develop contacts with the country’s civil society organisations in March 2008. In 2009, a delegation of Moldovan civil society representatives visited the EESC to work on enhancing cooperation.

Belarus

In 2006, the EESC adopted an own-initiative opinion to evaluate the situation of civil society organisations in Belarus. At present, the Committee maintains contacts with independent civil society organisations in the country and closely monitors political developments.

South Caucasus

The EESC commissioned an extensive external study on organised civil society in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in 2008. An opinion on “Civil Society involvement in implementing the ENP Action Plans in the countries of the Southern Caucasus” was adopted in 2009. The opinion stresses that the governments of the countries in the South Caucasus should cooperate actively with the social partners and other civil society organisations in implementing the Actions Plans and the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements.

A study visit to the region in 2009 has the objective of establishing closer cooperation with representatives of civil society. The EESC’s aim is to contribute to



strengthening of the civil society in the region and establish regular contacts with civil society organisations in order to bring added value to the ENP and the Eastern Partnership initiative.

Russia

The EESC has undertaken a number of activities involving Russian civil society organisations and has adopted two opinions on Russia. In these opinions the EESC calls for:

- a more proactive stance for the civil society in the implementation of the four Common Spaces as several aspects of these Common Spaces are relevant for civil society;
- deepening the cooperation between civil society organisations in order to strengthen the participation of these organisations in joint projects;
- boosting the role of civil society in the future EU-Russia Agreement by setting-up a civil society consultative committee.

Since 2006, the EESC has established working relations with the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, a public advisory body created in 2005 to act as a national forum for civil society in Russia.

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed during the EESC President's visit to Moscow in January 2008. The aim is to develop a cooperation strategy with the Public Chamber and promote a greater role for civil society in EU-Russia relations.

Cooperation with the Public Chamber includes regular consultations and the organisation of activities on topics

of mutual interest. In this context, a joint workshop dealing with the topics of energy and the Northern Dimension took place in Moscow in 2008. In 2009, a joint workshop with the Public Chamber will be organised on the topic of civil society involvement in the implementation of the EU-Russia Strategic Partnership and on the consequences of the current economic crisis.

The ultimate objective for the EESC is civil society involvement in the negotiations of the new EU-Russia Agreement and the setting up of a permanent cooperation structure between EU and Russian civil society.

Eastern European Neighbours Contact Group

The Eastern European Neighbours Contact Group is an EESC body responsible for relations with the EU Eastern neighbours. The Contact Group was established on 1 July 2004.

The Contact Group is composed of 12 EESC members and meets four to five times a year. Outside experts and representatives from relevant Eastern countries' civil society organisations and public institutions are invited to take part in the meetings. Members of the Contact Group also meet regularly with the representatives of the European institutions. These activities are complemented by organising and participating in workshops and conferences.



Opinions

The following opinions reflect the Committee's active role in policy relating to the Eastern European Neighbours:

- "The contribution of civil society to EU-Russia relations" (2005)
- "European neighbourhood policy" (2006)
- "The future of the Northern Dimension policy" (2006)
- "Belarus Civil Society" (2006)
- "The EU's relations with Moldova: What role for organised civil society?" (2007)
- "EU-Ukraine: a new dynamic role for Civil Society" (2008)
- "Setting up civil society organisations networks in the Black Sea region" (2008)
- "Civil society involvement in implementing the ENP Action Plans in the countries of the southern Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia" (2009)
- "Involvement of the civil society in the Eastern Partnership" (2009)
- "The external dimension of the EU's energy policy" (2009)

Studies

- "Civil society in the EU's four Eastern European neighbour states", EESC, Brussels, 2004.
- "Civil society in the Southern Caucasus countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia", EESC, Brussels, 2008.

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The leaflet describes the EESC activities in the European Eastern Neighbourhood countries.



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