



SEMINAR ON CIVIL SOCIETY FACING SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE IN THE DANUBE REGION

SURVEY AND COUNTERSTRATEGIES FOR NGOs IN THE DANUBE AND CEI REGION

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Conclusions and recommendations regarding the Draft of a new **Action Plan of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region** and its implementation

Background

The EUSDR, as all four European macro-regional strategies follows in the governance concept the multi-level governance methodology and the placed-based approach. These concepts give high relevance to the local and regional level and the sustained systematic participation of non-state actors and stakeholders like Civil Society.

In 2018/19 the EUSDR will develop a new (revised) Action Plan to optimise the strategy and its positive effects on the ground for the people in the Danube Region.

Since the launch of the current Action Plan the pivotal role of open, transparent, participative, multi-level and multi-stakeholder governance has been empathised by the EU Commission, the EU Parliament, the European Council, the participating states, EU and international bodies like the EESC, the COR, the CEI, the RCC and others as well as a number of studies and reports.

The European Union, the Danube Region as well as other parts of the world suffer from the relatively new phenomenon of Shrinking Civic Space on nation state level in the political and societal arena. This has been acknowledged by a number of studies from the Council of Europe, the Fundamental Rights Agency and the European Parliament.

On 15-17 October 2018 Civil Society representatives gathered in the framework of the 5th Danube Participation Day in Sofia for a Seminar on Civil Society Facing Shrinking Civic Space in the Danube region came to the following conclusions regarding the drafting of a new Action Plan for the EUSDR and its conductive and fruitful implementation.

1. General

The EUSDR is addressing the issues of good governance, governance and administrative reform. This includes a change in governance culture and the position of the citizens shifting from obedient subjects to informed, active and empowered citizens. The EU Cohesion policy and the EU MRS are a powerful tools to safeguard civic space and participation in the participating countries of the EUSDR. The EUSDR aim to *bring the strategy closer to the citizens* must be built on the modern concept of participation that is standard in EU politics. EU Commission, member-and participating states as well as regional and local level authorities have to jointly enforce the standards of participation and take on their responsibilities where civic space and/or, civil society participation is under pressure.

The EU Commission as guardian of the treaties, the European Parliament but also other EU Institutions such as the CoR and the EESC (especially addressed in the EUSDR action plan with view to participation) have to actively protect civic space and facilitate civil society participation in the Danube region.

2. Communication (Media)

2.1. CSOs and media landscape: the context

Even though the media landscape within Europe and the Danube region in particular is diverse and developments are uneven, there are some worrying tendencies taking place in a critical number of countries:

- Traditional media sustainability and financial independence has been undermined due to the outcomes of the financial crisis since 2007, the shrinking of the advertising market and the boost of online communications platforms. Many media outlets, especially print media, have faced diminishing returns or even closed down. As a result of the objective threats to their financial sustainability a growing number of media have been exposed to external pressure from political and corporate actors as well as to owner influence over editorial content. Together with the overall concentration in the national media markets this has led to serious risks to media independence and to media pluralism.
- In many countries in the region public service media (PSM), the longstanding backbone of media pluralism in European media systems, have been increasingly under pressure to commercialize and/or to follow the agenda of the respective government. Balanced and pluralistic coverage of different social actors, including CSOs, has been jeopardized.
- Regional, local and community media are not fully developed in all countries. They have been also subjected to growing political and corporate pressure. This limits the public space for democratic discussions on local and regional levels.
- Last but not least, the media have been affected by the overall political landscape in which anti-democratic movements and exclusionary rhetoric have been on the rise. Both liberal media and liberal CSOs have been a target of organized local, national and supranational attacks (smear campaigns, threats to the physical and online safety of journalists and human rights activists, administrative pressure, etc.). The public image of the civil society sector has been generally worsening.

Against this background, many CSOs are not experienced enough in effectively addressing the media and communicating their messages (positive project results, achievements, etc.). In addition, they are increasingly facing lack of competence and oversimplification in a context of deteriorating media content and of journalistic qualifications. Bypassing the media by relying on own channels of communication (websites, social media, etc.) is not an easy remedy since this hardly leads to the desired visibility and requires efforts to persuade the public of the trustworthiness of the content produced.

Another difficulty with regard to CSOs relationship with the media comes from the donors' visibility requirements, which are sometimes too strict and demanding for long and bureaucratic descriptions of the donors' program in question when disseminating a public message. This hinders the presentation of the project results, especially on TV and radio.

Capacity building for civil society actors embedded in a wider EUSDR capacity building concept including state and non-state actors is regarded as an important tool to improve the situation.

New increased and targeted information on the EUSDR in the region from EUSDR bodies (DSP; PAs, NCs) will contribute to a better understanding of EUSDR in the region and the role and importance of civil society within the strategy.

2.2. Strategies for better communication

The diagnosis of the context points to three areas of concern that can be strategically addressed with a list of measures.

2.2.1. CSOs shall focus their work on the following:

- Drafting a common communication strategy, including an effective PR action plan for the Danube Strategy;
- “Know your opponents!” approach – active research of the public opponents of CSOs (who they are, what they say, what motivates them);
- Search for support from professionals: PR and media experts (trainings, simulations, etc.);
- “Have a clear and comprehensive message!” approach when addressing the media – think in advance of the news value of a given message;
- Preparation of targeted messages to the different social groups.

2.2.2. CSOs and media representatives shall search to find their common causes:

- Partnerships of CSOs with supranational European media associations (of journalists, publishers, broadcasters, etc.);
- Joint events with journalists (tours, trainings, breakfasts) in order to establish positive relationships with them and to help them understand better the work of CSOs and also increase their capacity in the respective areas of work.

2.2.3. Working with the donors:

- Addressing the donors with feedback information on the visibility requirements and how they affect the CSOs work in practice along with a reasonable solution
- Simplification of the visibility requirements based on the specifics of the media channels.

3. Digital Transformation

The second workshop organised during the 5th Danube Participation Day in Sofia was dedicated to Digital Transformation and attended by participants from seven different EUSDR countries. The aim of workshop was to facilitate discussion among representatives of CSOs in EUSDR region on different aspects of Digital Transformation and potential role of civil society and CSOs in this so called 4th industrial revolution. From the very beginning it was made clear and agreed among the participants that Digital Transformation is not only about the technology. It is about changing the mindset, the processes, the interaction between different stakeholders (government, business, civil society, academia etc.) including how people among them are interacting. It is about changing our way of living.

In this very complex ecosystem evolving, CSOs have a very important role to play; on the one hand, towards the governmental institutions and on the other - towards citizens.

After two days of discussions on Digital Transformation, its impact on governments, business, citizens and society in general group a set of conclusions and recommendations derived that CSOs and other stakeholders should take into account in order to contribute in their best extent to the preparedness of society for all the challenges the Digital transformation is bringing:

- Initially it would be needed to **set up the working groups/task forces on Digital Transformation within CSOs and prepare digital Transformation strategy** answering three basic questions. Why do we need to transform? What do we need to transform? How we can transform?
- That would ease us **Identify new skills needed**. Namely the changes caused by Digital Transformation, either technical or non-technical, create the demand for new skills that should be identified first. To obtain them CSOs should hire employees with these new skills or educate and train those they already have.
- In order to complement with other stakeholders **building strong cooperation with other stakeholders (e.g. science/research, clusters, hubs)** would be essential.
- Finding sources of funding is crucial for CSOs to perform their activities. **Communicate with donors** and educate them about the new paradigm and its benefits would help to direct the funding instrument in support of Digital Transformation activities.
- Since CSOs are an important player facilitating the interaction between governments and citizens, **the inclusion of CSOs in Digital Transformation and other policies making activities on all levels (EU, regional, national, local) should be encouraged**.
- That implies also **communicating with citizens and educating them** about the consequences and benefits of Digital Transformation and how they could be used for greater participation of citizens in policy and decision making processes on all levels of governance.
- CSOs should be also included in **developing monitoring/assessment mechanisms measuring the impact of digital Transformation on society**.

- **Promoting good examples of Digital Transformation implementation and sharing data across the CSO sector** would build strong partnership between CSO organisation on one side and with beneficiaries and donors on the other.
- For sharing the experience, knowledge and good practices **setting up the tool/knowledge base/information hub for CSOs on digital Transformation including funding opportunities** would be necessary.

4. Outreach and anchoring in the Region

In the 3rd workshop, challenges and strategies were discussed regarding the CSOs' local, national and macro-regional public outreach. The discussion was structured in 3 major directions: outreach to constituencies, outreach to decision-makers, and outreach to other CSOs/media/business/academia. The following findings came out of the discussions:

4.1. Challenges to Outreach to Constituencies identified during the workshop:

- Expectations' Management
- Positive narrative/campaigns which can make a difference
- Outreach to groups outside immediate CSO circle (those who are less active or think differently)
- Boost citizen participation

4.2. Strategies to the Challenges to Outreach to Constituencies:

- Involve citizens with appropriate language (on the streets, on social media for youth);
- Consulting citizens and implementation of citizen-led CSOs agendas;
- Implementing targeted campaigns (concentrated in time) to showcase CSOs work and its benefits for the public using innovative approach (art, testimonials, celebrities);
- Exerting systematic pressure to enhance the space for civic participation;
- Challenge/test position based on argument/evidence in discussion with critics and opponents;
- Protecting/promoting pluralism and democratic rules;
- Civic education (formal and informal) including media literacy, critical thinking etc.
- Increasing CSOs transparency and Good Governance including strategies, action plans, benchmarks, impact indicators;
- Supporting/promoting volunteer work in general.

4.3. Challenges to Outreach to Decision-Makers

- Lack of knowledge (of DM) of CSOs and their work;
- Lack of Knowledge of democratic participatory tools and their purpose (see 4.2. civic education);
- technical language and terminology is unsuitable to reach out to citizens (and media);
- Missing communication systems
- Consultation mechanisms with state actors need to be formally implemented.

4.4. Strategies to overcome challenges to Outreach to Decision-Makers

- Demonstrating the added value of CSOs work;
- Demonstrating the CSO credibility basis;
- Seeking objective-driven collaboration with DM (even if there are differences in the methods);
- Increasing CSOs bargaining power (Capacity Building);
- Submitting evidence-based proposals for solutions;
- Implementing two-way agreements on CSOs – DM interactions including innovative elements;
- Pro-actively approaching DM to offer a platform for communication and building trust;
- Joint assessment (CSOs-DM) of the consultations and other ICT-based innovative collaborative methods to draw lessons learnt and ensure a learning curve.

4.5. Challenges to Outreach to other CSOs/media/business/academia:

- Lack of expertise and capacity of CSOs to work with these addressees
- Lack of funds for professional campaigning and PR
- Difficult cross-sectoral communication
- Difficulties in establishing media partnerships
- Claim our part of the civic space, defend it and properly use it (anti-democratic civic movements)

4.6. Strategies to Challenges to Outreach to CSOs/media/business/academia

- Increasing CSOs consolidation (spoke persons);
- Increasing CSOs synergies for advocating for improved participatory environment
- Strengthening the capacities of the networks;
- Increasing CSOs training and capacity building on how to partner with media and/or businesses by the respective stakeholders;
- Open discussions on who can claim the civic space.