

**BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE EU
DANUBE CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM:
“FROM PLANNING TO ACTION IN THE EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE
REGION”
EISENSADT/AUSTRIA, 30 JUNE 2011**

Speech by Morten Kjærum

Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

Distinguished co-speaker,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank Foster Europe and Stefan Lütgenau for the invitation to join your discussions today. I was asked to speak about “building civil society in the EU”.

This is an intimidating question to answer before such an audience. After all, you already ARE experts in building civil society *on the ground* – and I know that some of you have had to do this in rather difficult conditions.

So in my speech today, **I would therefore like to focus on the EU level**. In the words of Jean Monnet, one of the EU’s founding fathers:

“Make men [and I would add of course, ‘and women’ – make them] work together and show them that beyond their differences and geographical boundaries there lies a common interest.”

So, how can people from different cultures, different countries, with different visions of the future, work together in a civil society of the European Union?

1). I would like to start by outlining the preconditions for building civil society in the EU. The foundations of the building, so to speak.

2). Then I will move on to the walls, windows and roof of the building. In other words, the practical features which are needed to sustain a fruitful civil society.

1). So –starting with the foundations of the building:

The EU treaties recognise that civil society has a vital role to play in making democracy work in practice. It obliges the EU institutions to ensure civil society participation in governance. Civil society can provide a direct and continuous channel of communication between the population and policy makers in a way that elections by themselves cannot.

But in order to be credible, and in order to be able to ensure that citizens can participate in the democratic functioning of society – civil society must itself be founded on democratic principles.

I see these principles as

- diversity,
 - openness and
 - respect.
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- Turning to diversity:

In my current role as Director of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, I oversaw the establishment of the “Fundamental Rights Platform”. This is a growing network of NGOs from all over the EU, which has 320 participants at the moment. The Platform is a unique feature among EU bodies and institutions. Not just because of the number and the diversity of the organisations involved - but also because it is a network that is formally recognised in the Agency’s founding regulation. The Agency is actually obliged to consult it on certain issues. For example, the Platform has a say regarding the Agency’s annual work programmes.

Where does diversity get in? In the first few years of establishing and running the Platform one thing became again very clear: Civil society is not uniform – quite the opposite. And rightly so, as it should indeed reflect the multitude of different views.

How can we deal with this diversity in practice? I would like to give you some concrete examples from our Platform. It includes NGOs which are founded on strong religious ideology as well as NGOs which promote the rights of lesbian and gay persons; it includes NGOs who promote internet freedom as well as NGOs who advocate for children's rights including protecting them from risks coming from the internet related to sexual exploitation. Freedom of religion is freedom of speech.

In fact, the Platform was the place where many organisations started talking to each other for the very first time ever! The point is not to convince each other – but simply to listen to each other in a respectful dialogue.

- And this is exactly the strength and the beauty of a wide overarching network of NGOs. It teaches us the openness which allows us to get rid of prejudice and perhaps even establish common ground.

In this context, one memory is very strong on my mind: While Belgrade was being bombed a strong initiative was taken to bring together civil society organisations from Croatia, from Bosnia and from Serbia in Kosovo. Literally in the darkest middle of war, we were starting a dialogue, where all these people spoke with each other. We knew that one day that war would be over, and we prepared for it. Because we also knew that when that day would come, then we would need people who had spoken with each other, and who can start the difficult tasks of building bridges and of building dialogue, based on a minimum of trust and understanding.

At the bottom line: it is key that people interact. When states or similar powers go to war – people should speak with each other. It is one key task of civil society to guarantee that such a dialogue is effectively happening.

- And this brings me to the third precondition: respect for each other's views. We have to agree on what we disagree, and we have to avoid demonising each other where our opinions differ.

At the same time this does not mean that all views must be respected. Not all elements of civil society, are 'civil' so to speak. So when I speak about civil society and its work, I mean: civil society that works in accordance with fundamental rights values.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Through these principles, civil society in the EU can crystallise around common values and at the same time it can reflect the diversity of opinions where these exist. These are the foundations of the building.

2). But a house needs more than foundations and cornerstones. It needs walls, windows, a door and a roof. **So – what are the key features of a functioning and sustainable NGO network?**

Number one: There must be a clear purpose. What do we want to achieve together?

The only way to create such a collective clarity of purpose is, in fact, to include and involve people from the start. This will create commitment and ownership. And at the end of the day, the commitment and participation will make the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful network.

Number two: In order to be effective, civil society organisations, in particular when they reach the size of an international network, need a minimum of structural organisation.

For example, for the Fundamental Rights Platform we introduced a code of conduct, which clarifies the conditions for participation, and regulates how the Advisory Panel is elected. This panel has 9 members who are the first point of contact between the Platform and the Fundamental Rights Agency. While this may seem unnecessarily formalistic, having these basic structures and rules in place

have allowed us to get rid a lot of the debates on procedural issues that took up so much time in our first meetings – so now we can just concentrate on the important substantial issues.

Number three: Good channels of communication. Again an example from the Platform – it only meets once a year; so to allow for a more continuous flow of ideas and dialogue we have tried to connect members in different ways:

- We have an internet platform.
- The Advisory Panel meets twice a year and continuously communicates with my colleague who is their first point of contact.
- New coalitions have been built as a result from the networking within our Platform.
- Last but not least, when the Agency works on whatever fundamental rights issue, we always invite not only experts but also always NGOs for input already from the planning stage and throughout the entire project – which in turn helps NGOs to connect better between them.
- Other networks that I know – and also yours I believe – have regular working group meetings from within their members.

Number four: In a network, the members need to see the added value of that network. This can be learning from each other on past experiences. This can also mean bundling the expertise to develop new solutions. It can mean combining to form a louder and more expert voice. Notable successes among NGOs in influencing policy-makers tend to be found where NGOs are able to form coherent coalitions, such as the coalition the Starting Line Group, which contributed significantly to the adoption of the EU's non-discrimination directives.

Finally: It helps if NGOs and their networks have **basic funding** – and one that is non-partisan, but just dependent on their ability to reflect the opinions of the people they represent. This is particularly important because NGOs often represent the very people who do not have sufficient means to provide funding directly.

And if policy makers recognise that NGOs play an important role in policy making by acting as a channel for the views of a particular group, then it makes sense that such organisations are supported through public funding.

In this sense it is important to note that the European Commission is able to fund some NGOs within its different programmes. While I know that there is currently no specific EU budget planned for the NGO forum under the Danube strategy, perhaps this will change in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the basis of the foundations - diversity, openness and respect – and equipped with all the necessary walls, windows and doors, I wish you all the best in building your house of the Danube Civil Society Forum.

Thank you for your attention.