

Recommendations

Eastern Partnership Youth Conference “Youth for Rights”
Bratislava 27-28 October 2016

Context

The EaP Youth Conference “Youth for Rights” gathered over 120 active youth participants from the EaP countries, Russia and the EU who worked intensively over the period of two days, within total of 20 plenaries and break-out sessions (Youth for democracy, Youth for education, Youth for environment, Youth for inclusion and diversity, and Youth at work), addressing the major challenges for youth and youth policies in the region. The following recommendations were developed:

What the European Union can do

1. To create measures allowing youth CSOs, non-formal initiatives and civic activists to be better included in decision making processes. Encourage a minimum youth presence in consultations over EaP programmes and bilateral agreements.

Why: The youth of the Eastern Partnership countries are not generally active in decision making processes. Young people constitute a big part of societies in the EaP region ranging from 25 % of all population in Moldova up to 31% in Ukraine, and they remain affected by issues such as high youth unemployment. Typical youth participation structures for the region are official consultative bodies. Their role often is more symbolic and often not working. There is need for different structures. The young people of the EaP countries form part of civil society and their opinions should be heard in the shaping of policies.

2. Create a watchdog mechanism for monitoring the spending of EU funding. Involve youth CSOs in discussing how funds should be allocated and improve funding mechanisms so that CSOs have greater access to funding.

Why: It is important that EU funding is allocated in the most beneficial way and this needs to be monitored effectively. Support should not be limited to specific projects, but also for institutional support, core funding and capacity building, to map civil society development in the six countries, and to monitor EU funding. Involving youth CSOs in the discussion of how funds can be allocated would improve the reform process. Policies supporting genuine civic activism and youth civil society are low-priority in EaP countries and receive very little funds. A lack of knowledge about the EU and its assistance instruments, language barriers, and few tools to support NGO capacity building and dialogue with government administrations stand in the way.

3. The EU should assist national governments in encouraging entrepreneurship by prioritising education programmes such as Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs. The EU should continue to support exchange programmes and research programmes and ensure that these target the most marginalised groups.

Why: By continuing to prioritise education programmes and exchanges, the EU can reach out to the youths of the Eastern Partnership and improve people to people contacts. Cultural exchanges can modernise education, training and youth work across Europe in all sectors of lifelong learning, including school education, further and higher education, adult education and the youth sector. By prioritising the programme for young entrepreneurs the EU can improve freedom of movement within the private sector and create valuable work experiences for young people that they cannot have in formal education.

4. Introduce measures to discourage states from repressing CSOs and advocate for fast and non-exclusive CSO registration. Call for the release of imprisoned civil society representatives, activists, and other political prisoners. Assist civil society in monitoring human rights situations free of persecution.

Why: Civil society remains under constant pressure in some of the EaP countries and many activists and civil society representatives are in prison. Political opposition in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus is met with repression.

5. Engage in dialogue with CSOs, human rights defenders and youth activists about support to civil society and ensure that youth activist can meet with EU officials during visits. The EU must put pressure on national governments to heed the policy recommendations of CSOs.

Why: At a national level, the impact of civil society in policy formulation is very limited. Authorities are mostly reluctant to accept policy recommendations from CSOs, considering them unprofessional and politically biased. It is up to the EU to engage in dialogue with CSOs to ensure that they have a say in policy shaping.

What EaP Governments can do:

1. Encourage broader recognition of non-formal education, particularly on the issues discussed (civic education, inclusion, democracy, environmental issues etc.). Education should adopt both theoretical and practical methods with the option of combining studies with work experience, volunteering or internships. Through cooperation with Higher Education Institutions and employers, non-formal education can be encouraged through career counselling and mentoring programmes in cooperation with businesses and local organisations.

Why: In 2010 the OECD issued a report highlighting the advantages of non-formal and informal learning, and acknowledging these methods as valuable and rich in human capital. The report concluded that recognition of such practices would be beneficial to the individual and society and offered policy suggestions for how to organise recognition of these learning systems. Policies that recognise a diverse range of skills can enable greater access to employment. Through accessing non-formal education with the cooperation of local organisations and businesses, young people can become more knowledgeable of opportunities and businesses can improve their scope for employment. A similar report titled “Rethinking education: Towards a global common good?” was issued in 2015 by UNESCO.

2. National Governments should invest greater resources in modernising education and adequately training teachers at all levels.

Why: Studies highlight inadequate teacher salaries as one of the strongest factors undermining the status and prestige of the teaching profession. Teacher shortages still occur in rural areas where teachers are more likely to have to cope with subjects beyond their expertise. Greater investment in education can enable a higher standard of schools even in marginalised areas and thus contribute towards greater equality of opportunity. Institutions for training teachers are not adequately equipped with ICT and lack modern libraries and resource centres, in particular access to international databases on different range of pedagogical subjects. This results in inadequate specialist training and a limited use of active/interactive learning methods comparing to European standards.

3. National governments must strive for full and non-biased implementation of Bologna process reforms

Why: The Bologna Process was designed to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher education qualifications. The full implementation of this process enables mobility for employment.

4. Prevent discrimination in access to education and employment by allowing this to be monitored by giving CSOs access to educational institutions and national statistics. Promote and support the collection of data by independent research institutions on issues related to inclusion, tolerance and diversity in education and the workplace.

Why: EaP countries must guarantee that children and young people of all backgrounds have equal access to education and employment free from discrimination based on their gender, ethnicity, religion, economic status, sexuality or disability. Granting CSOs and independent research institutions access to national statistics and educational institutions for monitoring purposes would allow for them to highlight inequalities.

5. National EaP governments should create a friendly environment for SMEs and start-ups for young people by establishing support mechanisms such as tax reduction and preferential loans.

Why: Support to SMEs is one of the flagship initiatives advancing under the multilateral track of the Eastern Partnership. SMEs in the Eastern Partnership countries can be prominent contributors to economic growth, allowing adaptation of national economies to the global market. Small businesses are an important source for jobs and are important to move towards a green economy, which is crucial also to seize new opportunities in innovative and profitable sectors. A vibrant SME sector is also a good remedy against oligarchisation of the economy. The EU has taken steps to support SMEs in a variety of ways, but more needs to be done by national governments to create better incentive for young people to engage in small businesses or start-ups. Young people face greater hindrance due to financial uncertainty and would consequently benefit from special loans or tax breaks when starting their own business.

6. National governments should launch transparent and independent anti-corruption agencies on the national level, implement legislation about the e-declaration of incomes of public officials, and develop systems of transparent public procurements in the EaP states.

Why: Corruption remains one of the biggest issues in the EaP countries. In Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Index – Georgia remained the only country of the six to score over 50. Any scores below 50 indicate a serious problem with corruption. In Azerbaijan and Ukraine this score is below 30 (27 and 29 respectively) with little improvement in the past 4 years. Corruption has far reaching corrosive effects on societies, translating into human suffering, failure in the delivery of basic services (health, education), hindering economic development and undermining citizens' trust in the political system. Not only does this hamper democratic progress but undermines the prospect of greater economic and political cooperation with the EU. Implementing appropriate measures to fight corruption is a key to visa liberalisation dialogues, association agreements and DCFTAs.

7. National governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus should refrain from repressing CSOs and ensure fast and non-exclusive CSO registration. The imprisoned civil society representatives, activists, and other political prisoners should be immediately released.

Why: Civil society remains under constant pressure and many activists and civil society representatives are in prison. Political opposition in this countries is met with repression.

What the EaP CSF National Platforms can do:

1. The EAP CSF National platforms are encouraged to use the platforms as a means of engaging in dialogue and sharing good practices and experiences. Human rights situations should be carefully monitored within these national platforms and instances of persecution of activists or suppression of civil society should be documented and discussed.

Why: The multilateral dimension of the EaP is designed to enable cross-cooperation and dialogue. The national platforms ought to be used as a forum to monitor successes and failings for civil society. With careful monitoring of human rights, the national platforms can assist CSOs to engage in structural dialogue and advocacy with their governments and the institutions.

2. The EaP CSF National Platforms should liaise with governments to communicate the priorities of working groups in order for inter-ministerial discussions to include this in their agenda.

Why: The European Institutions and EaP governments have acknowledged the importance of the civil society dimension of the EaP. Therefore, it is essential that a portion of the ministerial meetings are dedicated to reflecting on the issues discussed in the working groups of the EaP CSF and reaching a common position on these.