



European Economic and Social Committee

REX/340
**A new response to a
changing Neighbourhood**

Brussels, 7 December 2011

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on the

**Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and
Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - A new response to a changing
Neighbourhood**

COM(2011) 303 final

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Rapporteur: **Ms Butaud-Stubbs**
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On 19 July 2011, the European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on the

Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - A new response to a changing Neighbourhood
COM(2011) 303 final.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 22 November 2011.

At its 476th plenary session, held on 7 and 8 December (meeting of 7 December), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 119 votes to three.

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1. **Summary and recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC welcomes the Joint Communication by the EEAS and the European Commission as a timely and urgent adjustment in the EU's policy. It fully endorses the Communication's stated objective of developing a new approach to the EU neighbourhood in order to strengthen the partnership between the EU and partner countries.
- 1.2 The EESC points out that the Communication can only be a starting point for a future partnership and calls on the EU institutions to develop a longer-term strategy, to be implemented under the 2014-2020 financial perspectives, in which the priorities identified, together with relevant budget for enhanced partnerships and various strands of the EU's policy, are integrated.
- 1.3 The EESC hopes that the EU will be able to react suitably, i.e. firmly and with a single voice, following the approach described in the Communication concerning the Euromed countries¹, to the recent events in certain neighbouring countries where genuine and durable democracy has not yet been established.
- 1.4 The EESC agrees with the principles of differentiation and conditionality and with the need for greater flexibility in relations with partner countries. At the same time, however, it asks the EU to ensure that the application of a less for less principle will not harm the potential of a

¹ Communication on a Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean, COM(2011) 200 final.

partner country to progress with the reform process according to its own pace and absorption capacity.

- 1.5 The Committee notes with satisfaction the Communication's new emphasis on civil society's key role in strengthening democratic processes and that support for a broad range of civil society organisations, including social partners, is considered as priority.
- 1.6 The EESC insists that the environment for civil society activities, protection of human rights, as well as economic, social and cultural rights and freedom of religion, is an essential criterion in the assessment of a country's governance.
- 1.7 The EESC believes that the EU support under the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) should be accessible and responsive to the sudden needs of a broader range of civil society organisations, including non-registered opposition groups. The EED instrument should be complementary to existing tools such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Instrument for Stability (IfS).
- 1.8 In this context, the EESC stresses that greater and more targeted support should be offered to employers and trade union organisations and other socio-professional groups, since they are important facets of social, economic and political life and potential guarantors of stability. Some of them, indeed, played a key role in the mobilisation for democracy. It welcomes the fact that the EED foresees support to these actors but hopes that the Civil Society Facility will also be used to that end.
- 1.9 The EESC calls for the effectiveness of EU-funded projects to be improved. The complexity of EU funding procedures leaves many non-state actors out of the loop. Helping organisations to obtain funds, for example through EU delegation capacity-building training, should be one of the objectives of the initiative.
- 1.10 Furthermore, the Committee calls on the EU to establish some precautionary measures and basic principles of good governance for partner countries governments which would like to benefit from component 3 of the Civil Society Facility that provides them with the possibility to set up capacity building projects to reinforce civil society organisations and their involvement in domestic policies and decision-making processes.
- 1.11 As regards trade relations, an ultimate goal of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) Agreement is to achieve a high level of economic integration between EU and partner countries. The EESC asks the EU to reflect on differentiated packages of DCFTA acquis which would reflect different levels of interest in European economic integration and different agendas in the partner countries. During the negotiation and implementation processes of the DCFTA and other agreements it is important to make mandatory provision for civil society involvement and to establish a mechanism for permanent dialogue with it. Civil society should also be consulted in regard to Sustainability Impact Assessments

- 1.12 Promoting freedom of expression, religion and the media within the framework of public freedoms and unimpeded access to the internet and social networks is also of crucial importance as it contributes to increased transparency and fosters the democratisation process. It therefore needs particular attention and targeted action.
- 1.13 Although success has been only very relative, the EESC welcomes the EU commitment to conflict prevention in its closest neighbourhood and calls on the EU to develop comprehensive strategies in this field.
- 1.14 The EESC calls for the mobility of people from the neighbourhood countries to be facilitated – especially young people and students, artists, researchers, scientists and business people – in order to increase people-to-people contacts for the benefit of both the partner countries and the EU.
- 1.15 The EESC, representing civil society at EU level, is ready to play an active role and share its expertise with the aim of building a more efficient European framework for cooperation with societies of the neighbourhood countries², in particular by:
- assisting in mapping civil society organisations and documenting the situation as regards civil society activities in the region through an open and inclusive dialogue with a broad range of players;
 - sharing its expertise, including that gained from cooperation with the EU's eastern neighbours, in defining specific criteria and processes for the establishment of truly representative institutions for civil society consultation in policy-making in the partner countries;
 - supporting independent and representative civil society organisations, in particular those which have played an active role in the opposition to non-democratic regimes, through capacity-building efforts and by sharing its expertise in a wide range of fields, such as social dialogue (including at sector level) and economic and social rights;
 - exchanging best practice in areas such as social dialogue, gender equality, entrepreneurship and corporate social responsibility;
 - participating in the shaping of EU instruments, action plans and programmes to strengthen socio-economic organisations and in the monitoring of their implementation;
 - getting actively involved in defining the operational modalities of the Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment for Democracy.

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Please see specific EESC recommendations contained in its recent opinions: The Contribution of civil society to the Eastern Partnership, OJ, C 248, 25.8.2011, pp. 37-42; on Promoting representative civil societies in the Euromed region, OJ, C 376 of 22/12/2011, pp. 32-37 and on The new foreign and security policy of the EU and the role of civil society, adopted on 27 October 2011 (not yet published in the OJ).

2. **Learning from the past**

2.1 Critical analysis of previous European Union activities

2.1.1 The complete absence, with a few exceptions, of a democratic environment has obliged the EU to adapt its policies on pragmatic grounds and to accept as interlocutors figures that could by no means be described as democratic representatives of their peoples.

2.1.2 During the whole Barcelona Process, for example, there was insufficient communication and cooperation between the EU, civil society organisations, trade unions and human rights organisations that were not approved by governments, thus an opportunity to influence political and social developments was missed.

2.1.3 Experience has shown, particularly in the Euromed region, that there is a tendency to underuse the available funding for civil society due to the weakness of these organisations in non-democratic countries.

2.1.4 There are some good practices of civil society involvement, such as the creation of thematic platforms, working groups and panels, developed under the Eastern Partnership and those could be adapted and usefully applied also in the south.

3. **Main elements of a new approach**

3.1 Application of the differentiation and conditionality principle

3.1.1 The EESC fully endorses the communication's emphasis on these two principles and is itself in the process of reinforcing their application in its own work, for example in its criteria for participation in the Euromed Summit of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions, and for the organisation of its missions abroad.

3.1.2 The EU must take into account in its more for more approach the different histories of regions and countries, their levels of development, different stages in relations with the EU, and their specific needs and problems. This approach will also contribute to the more efficient use of EU financial resources, which is a key duty of the European Union to the European taxpayer.

3.1.3 At the same time, we believe it is important to make sure that the less for less principle is not applied in such a way as to harm the development potential of a partner country where progress is less forthcoming.

3.2 Working towards "deep" and sustainable democracy

3.2.1 The EU has rightly emphasised the need to foster "deep" democracy by strengthening civil society and elevating its role in the democratisation process and in enrooting good governance standards in the ENP region.

3.2.2 It welcomes the introduction of new dedicated instruments to consolidate democratic gains. In this context, the EESC is ready to participate in the work of defining operational modalities for the European Endowment for Democracy and Civil Society Facility in particular. These instruments should be flexible and responsive to changing needs and contain targeted measures to support democratic processes in the EU neighbourhood, including via promoting the creation of political parties and free mass media, and reinforcing civil society involvement in democratic processes.

3.2.3 Although the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the Instrument for Stability (IfS), the European Endowment for Democracy and the Civil Society Facility all differ in their financial, operational and managerial modalities, the coherence and synergies between them must be ensured and reinforced.

3.2.4 In order to increase organisations' awareness and the ability to use these financial instruments, the EESC asks the Commission to draw up simple and user-friendly explanatory documents.

3.2.5 The EESC considers respect for both religious and civil freedoms to be a basic human right that should be fully protected in a region characterised by religious and political diversity. It calls on countries that have not yet ratified the existing universal and regional conventions and agreements on political, civil and cultural freedoms, and on economic and social rights, which are based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to do so without delay.

3.2.6 The media in the Euromed region play a key role in relaying and projecting the outcome of the transformations taking place. EU support needs to focus on initiatives to improve the professionalism and independence of existing media and foster an environment in which media diversity and freedom can flourish.

3.3 Strengthened EU role in conflict resolution

3.3.1 The persistence of the protracted conflicts in the EU neighbourhood – south and east – constitutes a great challenge for both the EU and the partner countries themselves. The EU has admitted that its actions so far have been of limited efficiency. With the Lisbon Treaty, the EU has a new peace-building mandate and a new structure to support it which provides a real opportunity for a new focus.

3.3.2 The EESC calls on the EU to develop comprehensive conflict prevention and peace-building strategies, especially for its closest neighbourhood, and to focus on ensuring more coherence between a variety of EU programmes and policies in the field.

3.3.3 The Committee calls for all peace-building projects to promote and include democratic principles and for monitoring systems, involving civil society organisations, to assess the progress on reforms. Greater focus should be on those groups whose influence on peace-building is substantial but whose voices are hardly heard. These include women's and youth groups, trade unions and local business. A focus on the continuation of business activities in conflict zones as a demonstration of resilience also merits support, as do trade union activities such as the peace and solidarity demonstrations. Most vulnerable groups, such as women, children and conflict victims, need special attention and targeted programmes. Most vulnerable groups, such as women, children and conflict victims, need special attention and targeted programmes.

4. **Enhanced trade links**

4.1 Apart from fostering trade relations, one ultimate goal of DCFTA is to achieve a high level of economic integration between EU and partner countries. Implementing the DCFTA and complying with it requires the partner countries to profoundly restructure their legal and economic frameworks. For this to happen, substantial additional assistance would be required from the EU to help them acquire the necessary level of development in order to meet the requirements.

4.2 The Committee asks that a chapter on sustainable development be included in all trade agreements that the EU is negotiating with its partners and considers that civil society should also be consulted during Sustainability Impact Assessments prior to the launching of negotiations. This involvement will contribute to the raising of public awareness on the short- and long-term benefits that the DCFTA can bring and will help to secure public ownership of the process³.

4.3 To this end, future DCFTA and other agreements should provide for mechanisms for civil society consultation, such as joint consultative committees, in order to achieve effective monitoring of how provisions related to the sustainable development chapter are implemented.

4.4 As regards social standards and industrial relations, the Committee insists that relevant ILO Conventions are ratified and duly implemented.

5. **Towards effective regional partnerships**

5.1 The EU needs to strike the right balance and seek synergies between the bilateral and regional dimensions of EU relations with partner countries.

³ EESC Opinion on Sustainability impact assessments and EU trade policy, OJ, C 218, 23.7.2011, pp. 14-18.

- 5.2 It has been recognised that regional partnerships with the east and south have contributed to the further advancement of relations between the EU and its neighbours. However, the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean, which have complemented Euromed cooperation, have shown a number of shortcomings.
- 5.3 The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the role of which was to complement bilateral relations between the EU and partner countries, has so far failed to deliver the expected results. Its role and objectives therefore need to be radically redefined. It also needs to provide permanent mechanisms for civil society involvement in its initiative. The EESC calls for immediate decisions to be taken on the role, mission, organisation and funding of the UfM. Furthermore, it believes that the UfM's operations need to be brought more in line with the EU's overall strategy towards the region⁴.
- 5.4 In general, most of partner countries have improved and intensified their relations with the EU through dialogue on association agreements (AAs), and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs), on visa liberalisation and mobility partnerships, cooperation on security of energy supply and on other issues. Unfortunately, Belarus has taken a big step back in its relations with the EU and the situation as regards democratic freedoms and the environment for civil society activities has also worsened in other partner countries, including Ukraine.
- 5.5 The evolution of the political situation in the EU neighbourhood countries should remain under close scrutiny and the level of economic integration and trade relations should reflect the degree of their commitment to build up sustainable democracy and respect for human rights.
- 5.6 The EESC is convinced that promoting increased mobility, especially of young people and students from the neighbourhood countries, would provide benefits to the partner countries, including an increase in people-to-people contacts. The same is true for artists, scientists, researchers and people travelling on business. This should be complemented by visa facilitation schemes, fee waivers and the possibility of getting multiple-entry visas, along with continued efforts towards the development of integrated border management, proper migration management, combating illegal migration, asylum laws and humanitarian aid for refugees.
6. **Support to civil society in the EU neighbourhood via the Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment for Democracy**
- 6.1 The support to civil society organisations has to be comprehensive, credible, multi-faceted and tailored to their needs. For several years now, the EESC has been arguing for a role for civil society in the drafting of the ENP and the monitoring of its implementation, for specific capacity-building programmes for civil society and for an improvement in the dialogue

⁴ COM(2011) 200 final.

between governments and civil society in the EU neighbouring countries⁵. It therefore endorses the three components of the Civil Society Facility (CSF).

- 6.2 For the implementation of these components, a broad and inclusive definition is needed of "civil society organisation", as suggested in the Commission Communication on minimum standards for consultation⁶. Consequently, the mapping of civil society is of foremost importance for the implementation of these components. With its various networks, the EESC stands ready to continue assisting in the mapping of emerging non-state actors, as well as networking with NGOs at regional level. Synergies can easily be found with the work of the Commission, the External Action Service and the EU delegations in these areas.
- 6.3 In addition, the experience of European civil society organisations could be used in defining capacity-building programmes. Besides the broad range of EU NGO networks, the main European economic and social actors should be involved. Their expertise could be shared with their counterparts in the partner countries in order to transfer knowledge of European policies and to support civil society in neighbouring countries in policy analysis, advocacy and monitoring convergence with EU policies.
- 6.4 The proposal to increase the involvement of civil society organisations in sector policy dialogues between EU and partner countries is most welcome, since this is an area that was unfortunately often neglected in the past. As far as economic and social players are concerned, special focus should be put on programmes supporting sectoral social dialogue in recipient countries. The EESC is willing to contribute to the strengthening of social dialogue, and in this context also calls for the involvement of ILO, which it considers crucial, and the European Training Foundation, which could deliver training on sectoral dialogue to social partners in neighbouring countries.
- 6.5 Component 3 of the Civil Society Facility foresees support for country-based bilateral projects encouraging partner governments to reinforce the capacity of civil society organisations and their involvement in domestic policies and decision-making processes. The Committee is convinced that an institutionalised mechanism for consultation with civil society is very much needed and that economic and social councils are one of the best tools for achieving such dialogue. Some precautionary measures and some basic principles of good governance should however be established for governments which would like to benefit from this support. The EESC is ready to establish a set of principles that should be met for the establishment of representative social economic councils and similar institutions.
- 6.6 Regional platforms of civil society organisations in neighbouring countries already exist: the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and the Euromed Assembly of Economic and Social

⁵ EESC opinion on Involvement of civil society in the Eastern Partnership, OJ C 277, 17.11.2009, pp. 30-36; EESC opinion on Civil society involvement in implementing the ENP Action Plans in the countries of the Southern Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, OJ C 277, 17.11.2009, pp. 37-41.

⁶ Communication from the Commission Towards a reinforced culture of consultation and dialogue – General principles and minimum standards for consultation of interested parties by the Commission, COM(2002) 704 final, 11.12.2002, p.6.

Councils and Similar Institutions, which was established as the result of an EESC-led initiative. The EESC has played a key role in the setting up of Economic and Social Councils (ESC) in many countries around the southern Mediterranean. Throughout this process, the Committee has advocated the broadest possible representation of various non-state actors in these councils. The EESC's expertise and support in the setting-up of ESCs as institutions for civil society consultation in policy-making could be usefully added to the possibilities for cooperation under the Civil Society Facility.

- 6.7 The complexity of EU funding procedures often leaves out of the loop many non-state actors (NSAs), which have the greatest potential but little experience on how to apply for EU funding. This is a recurrent problem in all countries and regions that benefit from EU cooperation funds. Assistance to these organisations in the form of, for example, training organised by EU delegations on how to prepare an application for funding could be one of the objectives of this instrument.
- 6.8 The EESC is ready to participate in the work of defining operational modalities for the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). It believes that this instrument should be flexible and responsive to sudden needs. It should use targeted measures to support democratic processes in the EU neighbourhood by promoting the creation of political parties, free mass media and independent trade unions and by reinforcing civil society involvement in democratic processes.
- 6.9 The EESC thinks that the EED should be a demand-driven, non-project but capacity-building oriented, flexible and transparent instrument. Assistance should be granted primarily to organisations that have no access to other EU funding such as the Civil Society Facility, the EIDHR or the Non-State Actors and Local Authorities Programme. The instrument should be managed at country level with minimal bureaucratic and reporting requirements, but should be backed by an efficient mechanism for the evaluation of results. The possibility of joint action with other donors should also be foreseen.

Brussels, 7 December 2011

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Staffan Nilsson
