



### **Remarks for discussion for the conference:**

#### **“How to improve the European Neighbourhood Policy? Concepts, perceptions and policy recommendations for its Eastern dimension”**

**Brussels, 4/5 November 2009**  
**Fondation Universitaire, rue d’Egmont 11, 1000 Brussels**

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Esteemed participants,

In our twenty years experience working in the countries belonging to the European Neighbourhood we have mainly been involved in democracy building. In our work we engage with governments, political parties, parliamentary groups, political foundations and civil society organisations (CSOs) in these countries. We are involved in an extensive network of political foundations in EU countries and candidate countries. Most recently we have been engaged in the Moldovan elections, we have assessed the political situation in Ukraine, Armenia and Georgia and we maintained our activities working with the Belarus, Russian and Azerbaijani opposition. We would like to share the following observations with you.

- A mature democratic culture is lacking in all countries belonging to the Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, independent judiciary, free and fair elections and independent media are deficient, but with substantial variations from country to country.
- The political society is underdeveloped. Many political parties seem to function mainly as vehicles for leaders to obtain and/or maintain economic power and hardly as democratic structures with a clear ideological framework and vision for the future of the given country. The ideological divisions as we know them in the multi-party systems of the 27 EU countries and to a lesser extent in the enlargement countries are less relevant.
- The lack of constructive political debate results in a lack of public trust in politics in general and politicians in particular, which then results in political apathy among the public. This presents a major problem for any political movement trying to make a difference.

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- Presidential political systems are in the majority. Besides Ukraine and Moldova parliaments do not seem to play an important role in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Belarus, and Russia. The parliaments of the latter are dominated by ‘Power Parties’ under the influence of the countries’ presidents. Political action, if any, mostly happens in the streets.
- Responsible opposition is either impossible due to the irrelevance of opposition parties and groups or simply not part of the overall polarised and antagonistic political culture. Power sharing or a culture of compromise is not a common feature in these countries to say the least: the winner takes all until the next election or colour revolution.
- A lively civil society does exist in the mentioned countries, but in most of them it heavily depends on foreign support. Civil society organisations that do not receive foreign support are either very weak or are connected to the power structures, with few exceptions.
- In some of the countries – notably Ukraine and Georgia – there is an established pattern of CSOs becoming tools for (future) politicians to get into politics. This is especially true for public figures/politicians who have already more or less established their names, but lack a political structure and support base. This can result in a lack of public faith in CSOs, as they are seen as political vehicles, and not instruments of a public system of checks and balances.
- Political parties lack strong institutional connections to the European political parties and the different groups in the European Parliament. Although contacts, training and exchanges of information take place, formal connections are weak because of the uncertainty concerning the ideological and programmatic similarities. Some parties are also difficult to pin down, as loyalty/orientation is often perceived in a polarised way: either pro-East (Russia) or pro-West (EU). A choice between the two is perceived as exclusive and limits a party’s options. However, from both sides (ENP countries and EU) there is a strong need and willingness to engage.
- Political foundations from the 27 EU countries form an important link with the political scenes in the European Neighbourhood (Eastern dimension) countries. However, in these countries home-grown political foundations hardly exist.

I want to suggest the following recommendations for the engagement of the different actors, focussing on the field of democracy promotion:

1. Promoting fundamental freedoms, political rights, human rights, the rule of law, independent judiciary, free and fair elections and independent media in all programmes and engaging in dialogue with the governments on these issues.

2. Intensifying the contact and relations with legitimised political actors, (opposition) groups and parties that share and advocate the principles of human rights and democracy and parliaments from the ENP countries, building on the experience of political foundations, the existing relations between parliaments and the international institutions (OSCEPA, PACE, international political party organisations) political actors are participating in.
3. Stimulating the development of multi-party systems on the basis of a struggle for ideas and the best policies for the future of the given country.
4. Strengthening the role of national parliaments and improving the parliamentary infrastructure.
5. Promotion of free and democratic trade union movements as crucial part of democracy and civil society promotion.
6. Encouraging a dialogue between political parties and civil society organisations in order to promote an overall democratic culture, which includes the needs and demands of society, communicated to politicians by CSOs. This also includes stressing the differences between the former and the latter (in nature and role) and the importance of establishing a functioning civil society that has a real outlet into politics but is not ruled or incorporated in it.
7. Respecting the role of constructive opposition in the ENP countries by involving a broad range of political actors (opposition parties, civil organisations, trade unions, think tanks, a.o.) in the dialogues of the ENP programmes.
8. Engaging in and encouraging dialogue between the leaders/governments and relevant opposition and CSOs on the above mentioned issues in order to encourage a more democratic culture in the countries belonging to the ENP.