

ICPS newsletter®

NGOs can help Ukraine with European integration: Lessons from Estonia

NGOs can make an immense contribution to Ukraine's integration into Europe by raising public awareness and debate about the EU and providing their government with critical input during the policy-making process. Ukraine can learn from the Estonian experience of developing systematic procedures and institutions to involve NGOs in EU integration

Estonia submitted its application for EU membership in November 1995 and underwent negotiations for accession from March 1998 to December 2002. During the pre-accession period, the Estonian government established systematic channels for including civil society in the integration process. Since both integrating into Europe and developing civil society are currently top priorities for Ukraine's leadership, it's time for Ukraine to start developing similar structures. The Government should take the next step in its dialog with NGOs and move from increased but sporadic contacts to full-scale, systematic and transparent cooperation.

The involvement of civil society in EU integration is essential for three main reasons. The first is public awareness: integration into the EU can only be successful if it is supported by a population that is aware of the implications, positive as well as negative, of taking such a step. NGOs are needed to support and complement official information campaigns. The second reason is effectiveness: the adoption of European norms affects virtually all spheres and levels of society, and hence the expertise and advice of NGOs in various fields is essential for both policy planning and implementation. And last but definitely not least, the involvement of NGOs is a way to strengthen democracy: it increases the transparency and legitimacy of decision-making and helps to promote general trust in government. For all these reasons, the processes of European integration and democratization need to proceed hand-in-hand.

Using NGOs to reach the general public

The Estonian strategy for informing the public about the EU was prepared in 1997.

The basic principles of this strategy were in line with the reform of governance in the EU as outlined in the White Paper on European Governance released by the European Commission in July 2001. Both documents emphasize openness, decentralization and the inclusion of civil society.

Estonia's information strategy aimed to promote objective knowledge about the EU and Estonia's integration process, to increase general interest in these issues, and to contribute to the capacity of the average citizen to take part in the public debate on the EU. The main instruments for achieving these goals were regional information points and centers covering the whole country, an electronic information service (www.euroinfo.ee), and support for decentralized projects aimed at specific target groups. The coordination and implementation of the strategy was assigned to the European Union Information Secretariat, established under the State Chancellery in 1998.

This Secretariat collaborated closely with "supporting organizations," including NGOs engaged in general civic education, such as the Open Estonia Foundation, the Open Education Society, and the Estonian Debating Society, and a number of specific areas. Special attention was paid to umbrella organizations that were assisted in developing their own communication strategies. Apart from the supporting organizations, the government supported dozens of NGO projects aimed at increasing public awareness about European integration. Such projects also received assistance from the European Commission and other foreign and domestic sources.

The inclusion of NGOs, interest groups and local governments in the information strategy provided indispensable help for reaching various target groups such as

pensioners, farmers, the rural population, entrepreneurs, students, women, and ethnic minorities. In order to promote a balanced public debate, the government supported not only pro-EU and neutral NGOs, but even some projects involving eurosceptic organizations.

The Information Secretariat also cooperated with key professional groups such as journalists, librarians, sociologists and teachers. The strategy included regular TV and radio programs and supplements in daily newspapers. Surveys and analyses commissioned by sociological institutions were used in planning and adjusting the strategy.

NGOs and interest groups also had an important role in the information campaign prior to the referendum on EU membership held in September 2003. Both "Yes" and "No" campaigns were visible in the ongoing public debate and helped voters to form their own opinion. Incidentally, the "Yes" campaign was successfully led by the European Movement of Estonia whose sister organization is also active in Ukraine.

The involvement of NGOs in communicating with the public was particularly important because EU issues are considered by most people, in Estonia as well as in "old" EU countries, to be boring, distant from their daily lives, and difficult to understand. NGOs can help to bring the EU closer to ordinary citizens and deliver information that is relevant and understandable to a wide range of groups.

Systematically including NGOs in policy-making

NGOs can also make an important contribution by offering advice and expertise and transmitting the views of different social and interest groups to policy-makers. In addition to the information strategy, Estonian officials established several instruments for including NGOs in policy-making on EU issues. Notably, this did not occur before Estonia started accession negotiations

with the EU. However, the need for systematic consultation with civil society had already been recognized by Estonian policy-makers earlier.

When accession negotiations started, the Foreign Ministry of Estonia instituted a transparent and broad-based system of including NGOs and interest groups in the process. First, the ministry kept the public regularly informed about the progress of negotiations and about the preparatory work of the government. Second, the Estonian positions were prepared by working groups that included, in addition to government officials, representatives from NGOs, the business community, academia and other key groups. The participants of these working groups were encouraged to share their knowledge and experience within their own organizations.

Then, in 1999 the foreign minister established an advisory council whose purpose was to advise the government on EU matters, provide a channel for the general public to influence Estonia's EU

policy, analyze the anticipated impact of EU membership on Estonian society, and increase public awareness about these issues. The council consisted of representatives of labor organizations, academic institutions, think-tanks and other NGOs. The council met regularly about every two or three months until Estonia joined the EU. It presented recommendations to the minister, and when necessary, its views were communicated to the entire government and legislature.

The involvement of NGOs is particularly important for the implementation of EU norms in certain policy areas. Key among these are agriculture, consumer protection, the environment, social dialog involving trade union and business associations, and gender equality. The effectiveness of EU norms in these fields depends on the monitoring and implementation activities of relevant NGOs. For example, Estonian environmental organizations and trade unions have had an essential role in monitoring whether EU norms are implemented in their field of activity.

Cooperation with partner organizations in other EU countries has been a great help to Estonian NGOs in developing their own EU-related activities.

Standing apart from the government

In the end, however, the inclusion of NGOs in policy-making must not take place at the cost of one of the main functions of civil society, which is to criticize and control those in power. To preserve this function, NGOs must not be too closely tied to the government. From the perspective of government, cooperation with NGOs provides a top-down channel for reaching citizens, but from the perspective of civil society, NGOs are a bottom-up force that enables voters to influence policy-making. So NGOs need to be able not just to assist the government and cooperate with it, but also to influence and criticize public officials. ■

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ICPS launches research into security and defense policy

One of the biggest hangovers from totalitarianism in Ukraine is the area of defense and security, an area that was traditionally closed to public scrutiny: any attempts to broadly inform the public about policy in this sphere were doomed. ICPS experts have begun to research the reform of the security and defense branches, informational support for accession to NATO, and the formulation of a migration policy

Security and defense: Reform from the outside

Ukraine's various forces encompass a large part of public life, including not only the Army, the police and the SBU or state security service, but also the Customs Service, Border Patrol, and the tax police operating under the State Tax Administration. Truthfully, the majority of these bodies has not changed the principles under which it operates or its organizational structure since soviet times. Most are still more oriented towards protecting the government from its citizens than towards defending the rights of the country's citizens and organizations against violations.

The leading role of overall coordinator in the reformation of the country's various security and defense forces bodies should go to the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC). Because of powerful internal resistance, these various forces are not capable of implementing reforms on their

own. An organization that needs reform is not generally capable of objectively evaluating the weaknesses in its work and agreeing to a reduction of powers, staff and financing.

NATO: Time to kill a few myths

Today, while Ukrainian politicians talk about accession to NATO, widespread myths circulate among the population that make this decision odious and meaningless in the eyes of most Ukrainians. This is the result of a lack of awareness among voters that: (1) security and defense can and should be an area suitable to the interests and initiatives of ordinary Ukrainians and NGOs; and (2) the Government should make political decisions in this area transparent and keep the public informed about such decisions.

For the most part, Ukrainians are ill-informed about NATO, the arguments in favor of accession, the consequences of such a step, the actual needs for public resources, and so

on. If this issue continues to be handled opaquely by the country's leaders, the totalitarian way of thinking will continue to dominate among Ukrainians and will remain a serious barrier to building an open democratic society.

Illegal migration: Ukraine's new security challenge

After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine faced new challenges brought about by illegal migration. With a border that is closed on the West but open to the East, the country has found itself giving shelter to tens of thousands of illegal migrants. This illegal migration is often related to such phenomena as transnational crime, including trafficking in both drugs and humans.

The issue of illegal migration has not been thoroughly examined at the national level in Ukraine. The country still has not developed a proper policy towards illegal migration. Meanwhile, the European Union sees the regulation of illegal migration as one of the three components of national security, along with counteracting terrorism and combating organized crime. ■

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