

I. About ECAS

The **European Citizen Action Service (ECAS)** is an international non-profit organization, based in Brussels with a pan-European membership and 24 years of experience. It provides services to a network of about 150 civil society organizations and citizens on EU citizens' rights enforcement and civic participation in the EU decision-making process. ECAS strategic plan for the period 2014-2017 is organized along three thematic pillars:

Pillar I – “EU Resource Centre Services”

Objective: Strengthen European citizenship, free movement of rights enforcement and enhance civic participation in the EU decision-making process by providing quality services to both CSOs and citizens throughout Europe.

Pillar II – “Open EU Decision-Making”

Objective: Contribute to developing an “engaged EU citizenship” by ensuring improved transparency of EU decision-making and more active citizens' participation and collaboration in EU policy formulation.

Pillar III – “Engaging the Unengaged”

Objective: *Diversify approaches to outreach and engage citizens and CSOs from CEE and the Southern Neighbourhood by using ECAS' extensive experience in civil society development in in the CEE, Western Balkans and Turkey.*

Given that the pillar 3 of ECAS's mid-term strategy focuses specifically on the EU neighbourhood countries, South and East, and that ECAS would like to work in conjunction with the European Institutions in the region, these recommendations are provided as a contribution to future EU policies and programmes and a more enabling framework for CSO activities in the concerned countries.

II. Recommendations

A. Empower Civil Society to enhance democratization processes in ENP countries

Although the *Joint Consultation Paper – Toward a new European Neighbourhood Policy* mentions Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) several times, expressing the need to consult with CSOs and include them in the ENP structures, *support to CSOs development, their status and democratic role* is not mentioned. Both in the Southern and Eastern neighbourhood (SN and EN), CSOs play an essential *watch-dog role*, holding the governments accountable and advocating for democratic reforms based on best international and European practices. Strong and vibrant Civil Society is a prerequisite for further democratization and improvement of governance structures. Moreover, the

crucial role of CSOs and active citizens in general cannot be ignored in the light of the revolutionary processes that have unfolded in the SN in recent years. In Tunisia especially, CSOs determination to impose participatory decision-making has given birth to the mainstreaming of the idea of participatory democracy at all levels of government. This tendency should not be allowed to disappear or be side-tracked by other priorities.

Therefore, **one of the focuses of ENP programming should be to empower and support the development of Civil Society Organisations in all the concerned countries**, providing adequate tools and funding mechanisms to **enhance Regional, but also North-South and East-West, transfer of best practices amongst CSOs.**

In practical terms, ECAS welcomes the use of *exchanges, targeted trainings, mentoring schemes and internships* to initiate the transfer of best practices as is suggested in the Consultation paper, but would recommend **to include CSOs as a specific category and beneficiary.**

Through supporting exchanges programmes and the transfer of best practices, the EU would underline the positive aspects of migration, balancing out the inevitable negative connotations linked to security concerns, immigration management and border controls.

B. Include information and communication technology (ICT), Web 2.0 and new forms of democratic participation as focus areas in the ENP

The Consultation papers makes no reference to ICTs and the potential they have in fostering open and transparent decision making, active citizenship and improving the quality of public policy. All of these goals represent a challenge in the Neighbourhood countries.

The ingenious use of ICTs by civil society activists in the SN was instrumental in mobilizing public support for change during the Arab spring and is still an important tool for raising awareness and advocating for reforms. For that reason the ENP cannot afford not to mention them, capitalize on their potential and should support their development.

One of the main conclusions from a recent ECAS research paper entitled [*Co-deciding with Citizens: Towards Digital Democracy at EU Level*](#) is that ICTs have a considerable potential in democratization processes if used in the right way:

- They can mobilize citizens from the passive to the active role;
- They can help change the entrenched societal and political traditions transforming the “government for people” into a “government by people”;
- Build more open and accountable governments;
- Widen the involvement of all citizens and broaden participation;

- Improve access to information;
- Improve the quality of public policy and decision-making (crowdsourcing legislation);
- Re-engineer representative democracy by offering more direct forums (crowdsourcing legislation).

As a specific technique *crowdsourcing* should be included as a methodology in EC financed programmes aiming at developing transparent decision-making, information society and participatory democracy.

Crowdsourcing: Crowdsourcing is based on the idea of collective intelligence which starts with the assumption that knowledge is most accurate when it consists of inputs from a distributed and diverse population. Improved communication technologies have developed crowdsourcing and innovation challenges to find solutions to design tasks and to offer better public services.

Crowdsourcing for policy-making functions as a method of gathering information and knowledge from an undefined crowd in the legislative process. In this way, the political process receives ideas, perspectives, and insights from a big crowd. Simultaneously, policy-makers can sense citizen's values and attitudes, thus crowdsourcing can also be seen as a method for "citizen hearings"¹. By using crowdsourcing in the policy-making process and seeking innovation through public knowledge, innovative and unthinkable solutions are pursued. To facilitate crowdsourcing, governments and institutions share data and other inputs, enabling ordinary citizens to be active part of democratic processes and coordinate collective action.

Furthermore, ENP programmes targeting democratic reforms should be designed in such a way as to include support for *digital empowerment* of the citizens of EU neighbourhood countries.

Digital empowerment can refer to:

- Acquiring digital skills by and increased number of people;
- Providing and accessing information about societal processes and decision-making (open data);
- Informing people on their rights and allowing them to participate in public life through accessible online procedures.

C. Support direct services to citizens and access to justice

Direct services to citizens respond to peoples' needs to find information concerning their rights as citizens and to empower them in exercising them. It encompasses a multitude of services provided to citizens to enable them to access information on their rights as well as obtain advice and free legal representation in exercising them. They find their base in the more general principle of the rule of law and the ability to seek and obtain redress through formal or informal institutions of justice.

¹ See Aitamurto T. (2012), *Crowdsourcing for Democracy: A new era in Policy-making*, Parliament of Finland, Publication of the Committee for the future 1/2012.

By supporting CSOs which are dealing directly with citizens with fewer opportunities, that address their questions and offer them legal advice and representation, the EU would reaffirm its commitment to help advance societies governed by law and support access to justice. In addition, support to such service providers has the potential to enhance citizen engagement, increase social justice and provides tools for fact based advocacy. Through their daily dealings with citizens' problems, the CSOs can identify systemic flaws in administrative procedures, laws and bylaws and can advocate for reforms based on citizens' feedback.

The ENP should include a specific mention or an instrument which would support CSOs providing information, advice and free legal representation to citizens with fewer opportunities. Such support would enhance the rule of law and social justice in the target countries but also provide CSOs with tools to engage in fact-based advocacy with the aim to improve public policies.