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THE TWENTY SEVENTH PLENARY SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
LEGAL AND POLITICAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

REPORT^{*}

ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN STRENGTHENING THE BLACK SEA ECONOMIC COOPERATION

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Given the steadily growing interest in popular engagement in political life with an emphasis that a strong civil society sustains integration and the fact that the concept of civil society has moved to the centre of the international stage, the Legal and Political Affairs Committee at its Twenty Sixth Meeting in Tbilisi on 18 October 2005 took decision to assess the role of civil society in the Black Sea economic cooperation process.
2. In this respect, the Twenty Seventh Meeting of the Committee in Athens on 3-4 May 2006 is dedicated to the “Role of civil society in strengthening the Black Sea economic cooperation process” with a view to elaborate the Report and the Recommendation for further submission to the consideration of the Twenty Seventh Plenary Session of the General Assembly in Yerevan in June 2006.
3. The present report has benefited from the contribution by the national delegations of Turkey and Ukraine. The necessary additional reference material has been obtained by the PABSEC International Secretariat through the related internet resources and current publications. The report is designed to examine involvement of civil society and the civil society organisations in the Black Sea economic cooperation process and to review how regional cooperation could be strengthened through more enhanced community engagement.

II. ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN STRENGTHENING THE BLACK SEA ECONOMIC COOPERATION PROCESS

4. In recent years, the concept of civil society has aroused renewed and heightened interest as a necessary precondition of democratic society promoting social cohesion. It has been discussed and debated in many international circles with its new dimension serving as an inspiration for millions around the world for struggle for better life, pluralist democracy, good governance and sustainable development. Civil society organisations have been adding a new dimension to traditional politics at national and international levels searching new forms of addressing the topical issues. Voluntary participation by average citizens in political activity through non-profit organizations has often become a tool to overcome certain political stalemates.
5. The role of civil society organisations and networks in advancing economic and social development is not viewed only in terms of their own effectiveness and efficiency, but also and increasingly in terms of their contributions to stimulating the overall cooperation process. Many societies nowadays are confronted with similar fundamental problems and despite existing differences, they share common perspective that civil society serves as a potential mediator for achieving genuine social cohesion and integration.

6. Today, there is a consensus that economic growth is not enough to improve the human condition. Other factors like democratic governance, organisation of civil society, the role of culture are equally crucial for human development and must be targeted in the development policies. More recently, there has also been growing interest in how strengthening of civil society can contribute to conflict resolution through bridging social capital by means of trust and tolerance.
7. Civil society is indeed important as an intermediating force between the individual and the social, linking and bonding people together making them part of a group or a community through sharing values of tolerance and pluralism, differences and diversity. Civil society, as the breeding ground for truly democratic society, where human beings with different ideals live together compatibly within a plurality of views, appears as a necessity for the efficient functioning of a political and administrative system, as it equips citizens with the social capacity to unite and cooperate for common purposes.
8. Civil society, civic culture and social capital are important components for strengthening cooperation since active civil societies are central to the evolution. In the context of regional politics, each country has its own history and development path where democratization can be comparatively slow to be translated into vibrant civil societies. Some countries are moving to more democratic systems of governance in which greater political space has been created for civil society. In others conflicts have resulted in increasing vulnerability of people and a climate of distrust and suspicion with related effects on civil society's participation. Despite these trends evidence in the region suggests that progressive civil society formations have been in the forefront. In many BSEC countries the civil society sector has experienced phenomenal growth, NGOs, as well as increasingly effective civic groups are addressing a widening scope of issues. There have been many positive developments in the Black Sea region pointing to the growth and strength of the civil society.
9. Civil society includes the broad range of organisations that operate within the voluntary, non-governmental sector. The range and scope of civil society within the region differs from country to country according to variations in historical and social contexts. Despite the differences in capacity and scope several broad trends in the role of regional civil society organizations may be noted. There has been an increase in both national and regional civil society groups, promoting specific causes, as well as more formally structured NGOs. The role and contribution of NGOs in the BSEC region is most noticeable in a number of areas including education, training, gender issues, health, sustainable development, social issues, etc.
10. Cooperating within network of members and with a wide range of other organizations at local, national and international levels, civil society organisations, in their turn, play important supportive role in the attainment of the common goals

set forth by governments and, therefore, contribute to promotion and implementation of the objectives of inter-governmental initiatives and organisations.

11. It should be, however, recognised that there is often a lack of awareness on the roles and activities of regional intergovernmental structures among civil society organisations. In this framework, it is essential to set up mechanisms for strengthening civil society input into a regional intergovernmental structure through creating, enhancing or invigorating the existing interface. Nevertheless, interaction by civil society organizations depends primarily on existing capacities of a national or sub regional institutions.
12. Speaking on the role of civil society in strengthening the Black Sea Economic Cooperation process, it is necessary to review to what extent the Black Sea economic cooperation framework provides the space for partnership with civil society organizations and ways in which civil society engaged can be enhanced.
13. The BSEC founding declaration was primarily focused on providing a framework for regional economic cooperation. Alongside changes in the global political economy BSEC's focus has also undergone changes. Those shifts engaged more attention to addressing pressing economic and social development issues with larger strategy to involve civil society actors in the BSEC process.
14. The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation has taken a special interest in potential contributions by civil society organizations to the activities of its organs. The organs in the BSEC framework have developed, in the context of their institutional aims, various kinds of relationships with national and international institutions. This has revealed the need to channel the contributions of those institutions and organizations by developing appropriate regulations.
15. Thus, in 1999 the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the BSEC Member States adopted "Criteria for Granting Observer Status to NGOs" saying that "a) Observer Status shall only be granted to NGOs, which are truly international. An organisation shall be deemed international (regional or sub-regional) if it has its statutory and real seat in one of the BSEC Member or Observer State, its administrators are under the jurisdiction of two or more BSEC Member States, and it is operational in at least two BSEC Member States. It is without saying that the applicant NGO must have a permanent headquarters and an internal organisational structure. b) The purposes of the applicant must be directly related to the purposes of the BSEC and fully in harmony with the spirit and functions of it as defined in the relevant articles of the BSEC Charter. c) The applicant NGO has to be of a non-political character. This means that it shall not endanger the relations between the Member States, nor international peace and security, it shall not get involved in any political activity against the interests of any Member State, it shall not resort to the use of violence, or condone the use of violence, terrorism,

racial religious or ethnic hatred, and shall not endanger the national security of a Member State, nor infringe its public safety, the public order and prevention of crime, health and morality protection as well as the rights and liberties of others. The applicant NGO has to be independent from states and governments. It must not be a state run institution, nor composed by state administrations, nor being under state direction and not receiving guidelines from any government. e) The applicant NGO must be non profit-making institutions, financially independent and should not use the observer status for economic or financial purposes. f) The applicant NGO shall be of a recognized standing in its field of activities.”

16. In order to foster increased civil society participation in the BSEC framework, special provisions to govern cooperative relations between the BSEC and civil society organisations had been included in the BSEC Charter.
17. The Article 8 of the BSEC Charter “Observer Status” states that “Observer status in the BSEC shall be open, upon request, to any State or international organization which expresses its readiness to make practical and valuable contribution to the work of the BSEC. Observer status may be granted, suspended or terminated by the Council in accordance with the Rules of Procedure.”
18. The Article 9 of the BSEC Charter “Relations with Third Parties”, envisages other modalities of cooperation with non-governmental organisations: “The BSEC shall promote a relationship with third parties (states, international organisations and institutions) interested to cooperate on various matters of mutual concern through:
a) dialogue partnership, within a frame of periodic exchanges and consultations;
b) sectoral dialogue partnership; possibility of attending meetings on specific subjects;
c) invitation of guests; possibility of attending sessions of the BSEC upon the invitation of the Chairman-in-office and with the consent of all the Member States. Dialogue partnership and sectoral dialogue partnership may be granted following the resolution of the Council.”
19. The BSEC-NGOs relationship is governed by the BSEC Charter and in more detail by normative texts enacted by the competent BSEC organs. These unilateral acts of the Organisation set the legal framework in which the interaction with NGOs exists. The Charter and the Rules of Procedure provide that the three types of relationship with NGOs (observer status, sectoral dialogue partnership or dialogue partnership) require a resolution of the Council. This requirement entails firstly that the consensus of the member states is needed for granting these statuses to interested NGOs and secondly that the relevant acts are legally binding for the Organisation and its member states. It should be also noted that although there is not specific norms for interaction with national NGOs, practical arrangements could be applied in order to associate NGOs to the BSEC activities. Such arrangements do not contravene the Charter and shall take the form of working relations, including consultations with BSEC organs, in particular BSEC

PERMIS, as well as invitations to specific BSEC events of mutual interest, with the consent of the member states.¹

20. At present, International Black Sea Club, Energy Charter Secretariat and Black Sea Commission enjoy observer status with the BSEC, while Black Sea International Shipowners Association (BINSIA), Black and Azov Seas Ports Association (BASPA), Union of Road Transport Association in the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Region (BSEC-URTA), Black Sea Region Association of Shipbuilders and Shiprepairers (BRASS), Coordinating Transport Meeting of the MS of Commonwealth of Independent States (CTM CIS) and Regional Commonwealth in the Field of Communications (RCC) cooperate within the framework of the Sectoral Dialogue Partnership.
21. It is noteworthy to mention that although much of the emphasis in the region is skewed towards an economic and trade agenda, challenges in social and human dimension that majority of civil society organisations are working on, attains extreme importance. The overall aim of sustainable development can benefit from the implication in the BSEC work of a wider range of non-state actors, including NGOs dealing with the issues in social, environmental, human development, labour, cultural, etc. spheres.
22. For its part, the PABSEC followed the practice of participation by civil society organizations in its activities, especially, through closer cooperation with its specialised committee on social affairs. Various civil society organizations traditionally have been attending the sessions of the General Assembly and the committee meetings. This tradition of PABSEC cooperation with civil society organizations is based on the significant contributions these organizations make, providing knowledge and additional information, raising new issues and concerns, lending expert advice in their areas of expertise, that, in many cases, have been subsequently addressed within the PABSEC framework.
23. Having in mind growing role of civil society and civil society organisations in the world at large and in the region in particular, there is a need for more reflection on how non-state actors should be related to regional cooperation process in more dynamic engagement of broader society.
24. It is obvious that Black Sea Economic Cooperation might have been more effective had the community been more involved in it through wide array of sectoral activities. There is no doubt that enlargement of Black Sea Economic Cooperation context with such involvement will only enhance effectiveness of the cooperation process. It will ensure better integration using more comprehensive scope.

¹ Ioannis Stribis, *Institutionalization of Cooperation Between Inter-Governmental Organisations and NGOs: The BSEC Experience*

25. How can civil society contribute and add value to the process of regional cooperation? Beyond the institutional relationships, the ‘people to people’ links that develop across national borders reinforce the momentum for regional cooperation and integration. Increasing links with regional civil society formations and a growing awareness of the need to build regional solidarity to address common concerns is very much important.
26. There are many tangible advantages that civil society and in particular, NGOs can bring to the BSEC regional agenda. Civil society formations first of all contain invaluable element of “people-centred” approach involving participatory process in promoting capacity-building, independent analysis and critiques, etc.
27. Civil society is well placed to work in complementary role to support regional processes through significant experience in various fields and its capacity to understand the issues that affect people in the region and the gaps in existing responses at national or regional levels. Thus, civil society organisations can make unique contribution to cooperation process through their experience of direct contact with local people and good understanding of local social, cultural and environmental contexts. This type of local and national level work empowers people also to influence decisions affecting them.
28. NGOs, in their turn, have the ability to link up across regions and sectors with relatively less formal constraints than governments and the private sector and are able to channel development experience from international networks into their own practice. National and regional civil society organisations acquire significant skills and experience as observers or participants in international forums. Civil society groups are able to build coalitions of support on critical social development issues in regional and global forums running parallel to intergovernmental cooperation.
29. Many civil society organisations identify common concerns and issues across the region and are working towards collective responses to them. In this way, they promote solidarity within civil society and demonstrate the practical value of cross-country and cross-sector sharing of knowledge and experience. They can and often do provide or develop spaces for people to articulate their views and represent their interests. NGOs also help to mobilise a range of civil society organisations within their countries. Many NGOs proved to be crucial in developing strong civil society networks and coordinating like-minded groups into coalitions around a number of concerns and problems.
30. Illustrative of this, we can refer to the *Regional Cooperation Network of Non Governmental Organizations of the Black Sea Region (BSNGON)*, initiated at the *Black Sea Regional Civil Society Forum* in 2004 bringing together representatives of the NGOs from the Black Sea region under the initiative of *Mission Armenia* supported by the *International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW)*. The Network

was designed to sponsor a lobbying group, a select group of individuals who would facilitate and stimulate cooperation between the Network and intergovernmental and other international structures, specifically the BSEC and the PABSEC.

31. The *Black Sea Regional Civil Society Forum* met in its second meeting in Yerevan on 17-20 December 2005 also organized by ICSW and Mission Armenia NGO in the frame of “Regional Cooperation Program”. It aimed to strengthen the cooperation between civil society organizations (CSO) at the regional level and increase the role of CSOs in the activities of regional intergovernmental organizations for the assistance of solution of existing regional problems. It was stressed that the social partnership development and unification of efforts have crucial significance. A program was elaborated with respect to Network’s further actions’ plan implying consolidation of the efforts of regional NGOs in order to assist in resolving the social issues through cooperation with regional intergovernmental organizations, national governments, parliaments and local self governing bodies. The Network’s Secretariat, which is the connecting link of 40 NGOs of Network, is situated in Armenia and operates through Mission Armenia facilities.
32. Another initiative in the region that highlights the potential role of civil society organizations is “*Turkey’s NGOs platform*” initiated in 2005 and unifying civic society organizations from all over Turkey. Its vision is to foster a suitable socio-cultural environment in which NGOs can participate in the country's government procedures by having citizens take their responsibilities as qualified and conscious individuals. The aim is to promote Turkey’s NGOs platform and NGOs in general; to mobilize civic dynamics; to strengthen the solidarity and the sharing of information, documentation and experience among NGOs; to increase the cooperation and communication among NGOs; to contribute to the fact that NGOs become transparent, accountable and responsible units in social affairs; to facilitate the projects of training and capacity building for the personnel, administrators and volunteers of NGOs; to have citizens establish their perceptions, attitudes and behaviours with regards to civic society, responsible and participating individual, to promote NGOs’, to widen the base of individuals and institutions who are expected to contribute to NGOs by building a positive and an attractive image concerning NGOs.
33. Another example of non-governmental organisations coming together is *Union of the Black Sea NGOs (UBSN-KASTOB)* created in 2002. It is a civil platform composing of presidents of unions and non governmental organisations of 22 cities located in the Black Sea part of Turkey. UBSN is considered one of the most powerful NGOs in Turkey with its membership of around 3500 associations and foundations. In 2004 UBSN organized the “World Black Sea Day” in Istanbul which was attended by ministers, parliamentarians, mayors, businessmen and multiple NGO representatives. The PABSEC closely cooperates with the

UBSN and the PABSEC representatives participate in the gatherings organised by this organisation.

34. *The Orpheus Civil Society Network*, on the other hand, promotes civil society development in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Newly Independent States (NIS). It is a decentralised and open network of information and support organisations serving and assisting foundations, associations and other not-for-profit organisations with information, consultancy, training and specific projects tailored to specific needs of the non-profit community in the region. Presently 36 organisations participate in the Network's activities, many of them from the BSEC member states. In 1994, in order to facilitate dialogue among information and support organisations the European Foundation Centre initiated the Orpheus Civil Society Project, a unique mechanism enabling cooperation and the sharing of knowledge throughout the region. Over the past years it has been tremendously successful in building the capacity of existing centres, developing professionalism, strengthening and expanding the Civil Society Network by which it facilitated regional level activities. The knowledge and experience of members on civil society in their countries is highly appreciated and already used extensively by non-profit organisations but also by governments and international organisations. The Centres provide services in five key areas: information and communication, including information about funding from foundations, and other sources; training and other educational programmes; mediation within the non-profit sector; and partnership building.

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

35. Bearing in mind the recent changes in the responsibilities of non-state actors in public life and their increasingly important role at the national, regional, and international levels, new mechanisms, methods and efforts are to be identified to foster participation by civil society organizations in regional activities.
36. The role of civil society in consolidation of cooperation process is important as a valuable resource for fostering regional initiatives through contributing to greater regional consensus and solidarity in addressing common problems.
37. An important aspect for strengthening the role of civil society in the Black Sea cooperation process is that of securing its effective involvement at national and regional levels so that it brings qualitative contribution to the endeavours undertaken within the region. Civil society involvement in Black Sea Economic Cooperation process can be more effective if focus is made precisely on how to best mobilise its resources and how to strengthen its consultative and advisory role.
38. For civil society engagement to make a difference in the region it is important that more active role is injected for civil society in the regional integration process. It is important to encourage support among governments and civil society

organizations, and to promote appropriate programs oriented toward strengthening civil society and public participation mechanisms.

39. In this context, development of a permanent structure or a framework for a regional dialogue among civil society organizations could serve as a bridge between national thinking and regional platform. Such a mechanism could also facilitate strengthening of a more cohesive sense of regional identity. Such a framework can offer an opportunity to create network of umbrella national civil society organisations with a view to serve as a forum for the exchange of experiences and information, for debate and dialogue between theory and practice. It can also form a permanent framework to coordinate and promote collaboration with other partners at regional and international levels.
40. At the same time, civil society organizations can contribute to disseminating information on the regional activities, in order to achieve wider public awareness on the activities in the Black Sea region and to facilitate transmission of information on latest developments in the region.
41. The biggest task for the sector of civil society is to be a genuine voice of its people, their opinions and concerns. It is equally important that people are engaged, concerned and empowered and that people realise, understand and believe that their voice is important.
42. Increased participation of civil society in the region will promote strengthening of social solidarity for meeting the goals and objective of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and add value in the process of maintaining peace and political stability in the region.
43. Strengthening of the existing initiatives promoting increased participation of civil society in public issues as well as establishment of new partnership frameworks will enable constructive ties between governments, nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, and the diverse sectors of civil society to work in favour of cooperation and development in the region.