

Serbia on the Road to the EU – Thinking Ahead

Round Table report

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Round table discussion with representatives of Serbian civil society took place at the premises of the Slovak Embassy in Belgrade on September 8, 2006. It was a joint initiative of the Bratislava-based **Pontis Foundation** and the **Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs** to define what the EU can do for Serbia and how can be the European idea brought back to the centre of the Serbian public discourse. While the Finnish Presidency is tasked with drafting comprehensive package of incentives for this biggest country in the Western Balkans, the organizers wanted to invite leading Serbian NGO leaders and academics to spell out their vision, needs and expectations towards the EU.

More than 35 participants from leading Serbian NGOs, government and various local media took part at the event, as well as several Slovak NGOs active in the Western Balkans and the delegation of the Slovak foreign ministry led by the Director General of the Political Unit at MFA, Ambassador Miroslav Lajčák. Serbian government was represented by the Deputy Prime Minister Ivana Dulić–Marković and the Director of Serbian European Integration Office Tanja Mišćević.

1. Civil society faces internal crises

Several very good ideas and suggestions came out from the round table, but on the whole it proved the fact that Serbian civil society is caught in the “viscous circle” of domestic politics and pessimistic outlook for the next parliamentary elections, when ultranationalist Radical Party dominates the polls. According to Miljenko Dereta of **Civic Initiatives**, “public dialogue on all key issues” (Kosovo, new constitution, EU integration) is blocked from the current government, either towards the public, or toward NGOs”. Sonja Licht of **Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence** warned that unless it will be clear what are the roles and responsibilities of all key actors, and “who is the owner of the whole European integration process”, Serbia will not move ahead on the EU integration track. Many participants agreed that the attractiveness of the idea of the EU popularisation in Serbia has been diminishing for some time.

2. Role of the external factor

While the state institutions responsible for EU integration and also civil society organisations are quite weak, there is a need for the external factor to speed up the whole process. Just as the necessary reforms on the national level had to be urged by the EU, the more proactive approach of the civil society seems to be impossible without an “awakening push” from outside – either from donors or partner NGOs. Milan Nič of **Pontis Foundation** sees the need for closer cooperation between the government’s EU Integration Office, civil society, local governments, media and other actors – not only declaratively, but practically through local grant mechanism. Civil society, on its part, has to be more active on the issue of European perspective for Serbia, and more visible, also from outside of the country. However, only few concrete points and project ideas were expressed from present Serbian NGOs during the Round Table.

3. Need for widespread appeal

Hedvig Morvai-Horváth of the **Citizens’ Pact for South East Europe** noted that the possible role of Serbian citizens in the process of European integration is still not sufficiently acknowledged, by the national government nor by the European Commission. It is very

important to have citizens, NGOs and local governments actively involved in the process, also to counteract the irresponsible behaviour of national politicians and the negative image that Serbia has in the EU member states.

4. Focus on young generation

Many participants agreed that EU strategy for Serbia should focus on youth and universities. Tanja Mišćević, Director of Serbian European Integration Office agreed and called for NGOs. It is frequently noted that due to strict visa policy of the EU, 80 % of young people in Serbia has never been abroad. The exchange programs would help young people to get connected to Europe and at the same time enable many of them to act as “civil diplomats” in promotion of a positive image of Serbia in the EU member states.

Recommendations:

- EU should use available instruments to act in support of internal transformation and overcoming isolation of Serbian society from Europe
- Comprehensive package for Serbia, drafted by the Finish Presidency, should also focus on young generation, universities and exchange programs and networking
- EC and Serbian government can activate and engage local civil society in promoting the European Perspective for Serbia
- EC should put pressure on the Serbian government to enact new NGO law after transparent and orderly consultation process with local civil society
- Serbian government should create flexible and small grant mechanism on promoting European integration for NGOs and local governments
- An elaborated European integration campaign should be developed at the level of local communities. Local governments can develop and adopt their own European integration policy, not directly related to the technicalities of the *acquis communautaire*, but more to the anchoring of democratic values and develop a more open and inclusive approach to local community problems.
- European NGOs should diversify their partner organizations in Serbia and go as much as possible into the regions; local NGOs need more training on public policy dialogue with the government as well as on watch-dog and government monitoring practices

