

Advisory Board level portfolio review European Civil Liberties Project

PUBLIC SUMMARY

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Participants

Presenters: Aryeh Neier, OSF Emeritus President, and Balazs Dénes, Director ECLP (lead staffer)

Discussant: Susan Treadwell

Moderator: Maria Cattai

Other participants: Chris Stone, Srdjan Bogosavljevic, Ivan Krastev, Annette Laborey, Petra Pinzler, Istvan Rev, Miklós Sándor, Aleksander Smolar, Mabel van Oranje, Jordi Vaquer, Belen Marin, Léonie van Tongeren (rapporteur), and Alex Krasznay (via V/C).

Introductory presentation

In his introductory presentation Aryeh Neier, OSF Emeritus President, explained the project uses the term 'civil liberties' instead of 'human rights', as the latter often connotes to publicize abuses internationally, while the ECLP works simultaneously at both the European and the national level. The national level is vital as this is where most violations occur, whereas the EU level is important as a combined effort of European countries is likely to be more effective than a country by country approach. Moreover, promoting rights in Europe is relevant for Europe itself, but also for the rest of the world, given the global significance of its model of protection of rights.

Lessons learned

Balazs Dénes, Director of ECLP, shared several lessons learned. He stressed that "It is one thing what we want, and another what exists on the ground", indicating that ECLP had to adapt its original geographic focus to the situation on the ground, starting in only four of the seven foreseen target countries.

A second lesson learned is that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work. A major obstacle is that many groups do not deliver the expected results, focussing on audiences that are already convinced and failing to understand a simple language which can be understood by the broader public. Mobilization and communication skills of organizations in Europe still have a lot of room for improvement. Besides grants, the ECLP therefore provides tools, trainings, and networking opportunities to selected groups and has launched a new communication and mobilization network, called the European Liberties Platform (ELP). The flagship project of the ELP is a web portal called liberties.eu, which aims to share news and raise awareness about human rights issues across Europe. Unlike other platforms, which are often only available in English, the content of liberties.eu is available in 12 languages, thereby able to reach bigger crowds. While further improvement is still needed, it is encouraging to see that already more than 60% of viewers of the online platform are from non-English speaking countries. Within the first two months of its existence, the Platform's website has acquired more than 10,000 followers on Facebook and it is already considered by many to be the primary source of information on civil liberties in Europe.

A third lesson learned is related to the difference between 'independence' and 'financial independence'. ECLP realised it has to act in two different scenarios: while in countries in which state funding has not generally posed any difficulties for organizations to criticise their public donors, ECLP can accept that some of its partners are recipients of public resources, while in countries in which the tradition of state funding is not accompanied by the tradition of separating independence from financial independence, it has to provide meaningful help to its partners in fundraising in order to foster strong, emerging civil liberties movements.

Key questions

There was a very lively debate during which insightful questions were posed and several suggestions were made. Questions were asked on the way the project was perceived by grantees, on whether one should hold on to the language of human rights or use a language that will bring more people to the table, as well as on the value of supporting organizations which have become over dependent on OSF because of the difficulty in finding other donors due to the controversial character of their work. Other questions were raised about the extent to which the EU should be seen as a good model, taking into account the many times the EU has been unable or unwilling to deal with human rights abuses within its own Member States. Even the Haider case, which by some is seen as a success, is seen by others as a failure, as action was undertaken by a selected group of individual Member States rather than by the EU. Furthermore, questions were posed on the budget, communication strategy, plans for the next five years, as well as on collaboration with other OSF programs and ways in which to prevent overlap. Furthermore, the question was posed whether replicating a US model in Europe is really the best solution to the problems that Europe is currently facing, especially taking into account the high levels of anti-Americanism that can be seen around Europe.

Responses

Balazs recognized that the EU has failed in standing up against human rights abuses committed within its Member States, and added that the Commission and the EU itself are also doing appalling things themselves (e.g. in relation to data retention), causing terrible problems in some EU countries. He thereby pointed to the need for a strong network which can serve as the watchdog of the EU and that rather than a top-down structure, strong national actors are needed.

He explained that ECLP works with other OSF programs through joint grant making and that it is launching joint initiatives with the Human Rights Initiative and the Justice Initiative. Additionally, ECLP is in contact with the Information Program and the Open Society European Policy Institute.

Turning to the issue of communication, Balazs explained that some of the biggest challenges the project faces are related to litigation and communication. A success in Court, he explained, is by no means a success in public. In Europe, unlike in the US, court cases simply do not shape public debates. Moreover, many European civil society groups are still unable to talk to the 'other half' of society. ECLP therefore has a strong focus on communication. In addition to training on storytelling and video tools, the project tries to make organizations aware that they should not just talk about what is going wrong in societies, but also about what kinds of societies we aspire to become and create. While recognizing that communication is important, Aryeh added that changing the practice and working both at the micro and macro levels is even more important.

Regarding the perspectives for the next five years, Balazs expressed the hope to talk to at least 1% of the population of the EU, being five million people, and to double this ten years from now. Aryeh, on the other hand, indicated he would like to be 'on the road' to introducing in the EU an ecosystem comparable to that of the US in which ACLU attorneys are present in every state.

Jordi Vaquer, Director of OSIFE, pointed out that ECLP has helped to 'think European' like no other OSIFE project has, as well as to rethink the work of the entire Open Society Under Stress cluster, which ECLP forms part of.

Next steps and proposed follow-up

In the second half of 2014 and in 2015, ECLP will focus on Germany, Belgium, and France, the three countries it had initially included in its target group, but which it was not yet able to work on. It will follow a needs-based approach in these countries, taking into consideration the state of the civil liberties organizations present. In France, together with the Open Society Justice Initiative, ECLP is using consultants to develop and test the idea of an online resource center for civil liberties and human rights NGOs. In Belgium, ECLP's main mission is to provide assistance to the two sections of the Human Rights League. As the Flemish and the Walloon section of the League are operating independently from each other, ECLP aims to foster cooperation between the two sections on specific projects and to stimulate them to work in a more coordinated way, while also providing them with assistance on communication. In Germany, ECLP will engage in further consultations with specialized human rights NGOs to explore the idea of a new, multi focused civil liberties NGO and map the donor environment to identify co-funding possibilities for such a project.

At the Platform's annual meeting, which will take place in London on September 24 and 26, ECLP will propose that its members start using the Platform for coordinated advocacy actions at the European level. Additionally, while ECLP does not wish to register the Platform as a separate legal entity, it would like to propose a move from its current informal and loose operating mode to a somewhat more formal structure with an Executive and an Advisory Committee. Moreover, ECLP aims to increase the Platform's members from 14 to 18 and to further strengthen the Platform's presence on social media.

NOTE: Because this was an Advisory Board level portfolio review this document should either be endorsed by the Advisory Board or complemented by an addendum that recaps the Advisory Board's perspective.