

Symposium of thinkers and doers in Latvia

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Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis (left) and
Civic Alliance – Latvia Directress Rasma Pīpiķe (right)

On the 4th of June 2010, in the Riga Latvian Society House, a Symposium of thinkers and doers about the **Possibilities and Challenges of Civil Society in Latvia** was held with the goal to make its participation more effective. This event was organized by the NGO “Civic Alliance – Latvia” and chaired by the journalist Gundars Rēders.

Attendees represented more than 50 different fields and included representatives from NGOs,

employers and workers associations, ministries and other government authorities as well as researchers and science. An invited panel of experts gave their opinions answered questions about the state of the civil society today and its future in Latvia.

Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis and the Director of the State Chancellery Gunta Veismane both addressed the symposium. The Prime Minister’s attendance and participation demonstrates that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are improving their relationship with government and that they recognize the growing relevance and importance of NGOs in the civil society. Rasma Pīpiķe noted that NGO participation is huge power, and that such power should be used properly, in order to listen to the needs of society and respond to them with effective decisions.

Rasma Kārklīņa, Professor of Political Science, talked about Modern concepts of Civil Society. According to her, new forms of cooperation and partnership should be established. One of the key ideas of this symposium was to find a concrete proposal, a solution, and a partnership model based on cooperation between government, non-governmental organizations, business and the general public.

There is a need for a formal framework. Civil society needs more organized civil society activities. Events like the blond parade and other one-day events should be regular occurrences. Moreover, the civic society participation has to focus on the next generation, the youth, who are creating new communities online. One of the points she made was about the NGO and the government relation. NGO shouldn’t act against the government but in cooperation with it. This is why Kārklīņa used the term “civic movement” more often than NGO.

Dr. Roger Normann, Post-Doctoral at the University of Agder and Researcher at Agderforskning, came from Norway to participate and gave his experience on the Norwegian mechanism. He made a presentation about network based development. As most people use Networks in everyday life, for social matters (Facebook and Twitter), interaction (electronic mail service) or information (instant news), there is the challenge to support network based development which is fragile. The idea is the creation of a governance network system with

actors, structure, rules and norms. This network collaboration would have three sources – one instrumental with measurable quantities, one institutional with norms and rules and finally one ideological with actors and institutions.

The solution to a fragile existing structure would be to pool competences, and to develop bargaining, and achieve common goals. As we all know, the fragmentation is a dysfunctional system. The ability to work across actors has to be developed. Also, there is a need for politicians able to communicate across sectors. One of the aims of the presentation was to underline the need for the emergence of collaborative work.



Director of the State Chancellery Gunta Veismane (right),
Professor of Political Science Rasma Kārklīņa (in the middle),
President of European Movement – Latvia Andris Gobiņš.

The representative from the European and Economic Social Committee (EESC) Armands Krauze made a presentation on the function and work of the EESC. This European Institution represents NGOs that are engaged in social affairs. Its role is to serve as a bridge between NGOs and Europe. *“EESC: a bridge between Europe and organized civil society”* is the current slogan of the EESC. One important figure raised was that 75% of the proposals made by the Committee are adopted by the European Parliament. He pointed out that civil society is not well organized in Latvia. This is why there is a need for a better organized civic society where opinions and positions of citizens are taken into consideration. One question raised was: “Should NGO join the electoral campaign and more generally become politically active?” One example to illustrate the answer was Finland where NGOs are really involved in politics and the system works well. An audience member suggested that because there are seven representatives of Latvian society in the EESC, they should raise public awareness about them and their work.

In the beginning of the afternoon, there was a **panel discussion**. Nine experts of different field explained their expectations for this symposium and answered questions from the audience. Latvian University Faculty of Social Sciences Dean Juris Rozenvalds, Employers’ Confederation of Latvia General Directress Elīna Egle, Free Trade Union of Latvia Vice Chairman Egils Baldzēns, Chamber of Commerce Chairwoman of the Board Žaneta Jaunzeme Grende, Leader of project „Pēdas” Vita Jaunzeme, Cooperation Council of Farmers’ Organizations Chairman of the Board Armands Krauze, Post Doctor at the University of Agder and Researcher at Agderforskning Dr. Roger Normann, Civic Alliance – Latvia Directress Rasma Pīpiķe, Journalist and moderator of panel Gundars Rēders participated.

Juris Rozenvalds pointed out that the civil society is missing one important element in the scheme: citizens and their participation. Another aspect about the Latvian population is the level of trust they have in NGOs. How much does the population trust trade unions and NGOs?

Zaneta Jaunzeme Grende talked about trust as a regular step-by-step effort. She gave figures about the functioning of this institution. For example, out of the 46 opinions raised by the Chamber of Commerce, 22 have been launched, so that means that the government is hearing them. Their activities thus have a purpose.



Participants of the symposium in Riga, Latvia.

Vita Jaunzeme had been invited as the representative of the “cleaning festival” which was a success in Latvia. The key success of this event was the fact that participants could immediately see the outcome. As she said, if 10% of the society unite and speak in a singular voice, it is a source of power. Her utopian dream is that political parties would come to an end, shifting to NGOs which would guide citizens. NGOs should get involved in politics.

Armands Krauze said that NGO should structure themselves and have a more balanced attitude which would permit them to have a single representation, a common view. Moreover, they should bear in mind that social issues are never separated from economic issues.

Roger Normann told the assembly that Norwegian society is different from that of Latvia, in its very functional system. In fact, in Norway, there is a narrow gap between social groups meaning that there is a smaller difference between high salaries and low salaries. “Engineer PhDs doesn’t make very much more than industrial workers”.

Rasma Pipiķe pointed out that the symposium is the right time to find a way of cooperating. She recognized that the NGO sector is fragmented and that there are multiple frameworks not just one. One solution for the future of civil society would be to involve the youth who were following the symposium live online (more than 70 viewers), and which is the target group no institutionalized structure is able to reach. There is a need to involve people who are users of the social network in the process. Definitely, one goal of the new model for participations of the civil society is to improve the extent of public engagement.

“Although NGOs are not sovereign like states, they clearly wield significant power. One reason for their influence is that they reflect the great masses of civil society.”

Saladin Al – Jurf, student at the University of Iowa

During the time reserved for questions from the audience, many attendants raised their hands and tried to make their voices heard. One of the first suggestions made for the successful influence of NGOs on the government is the involvement of the organizations in the pre-Parliament election processes and explain to people how to make critical decisions. Rasma Pipiķe responded to this proposition by saying that NGOs should work not only half a year before election time, but throughout the year. Another remark was that there is a lack of knowledge about what concerns people on different issues. The key solution would be to develop a way of collecting their views and opinions and through NGO represent them to the

institutions creating policy documents. And finally, comments were made about the rural areas. There should be a discussion about the fact that urban areas receive much more financial aid than small-scale projects in rural areas.

In afternoon, there were a two thinkers and doers working groups. The introductory speaker for two groups was the policy coordinator of Civic Alliance – Latvia Inta Šimanska with a presentation about the Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision Making Process (Adopted by the Council of Europe in 01.10.2009.), and for other two groups Chairwoman of Chamber of Commerce Žaneta Jaunzeme Grende, who explained Challenges of Participation in Latvia.

In first group thinkers, along with NGO Consultant Irīna Kulitāne, discussed the **values** of civil dialogue. In the second group doers and with representative of State Chancellery Inese Vaivare discussed the **responsibilities** of officials and civil society. In the third group thinkers, and President of European Movement – Latvia Andris Gobiņš, discussed the **best model for cooperation** in Latvia (social partners and NGOs). Finally in the fourth group doers and Researcher of Centre for Public Policy „PROVIDUS” Iveta Kažoka discussed what changes can be achieved as a **result** of participation. Civic Alliance – Latvia will summarize the results of all groups and will publish them in Latvian on the NGO portal www.nvo.lv.

The symposium of thinkers and doers was broadcast live online with more than 70 viewers. We welcome you to watch the video at <http://live.nvo.lv/>

Civic Alliance – Latvia will continue discussions about improved co-operation with partners and about setting up the new co-ordination system to ensure that added value of participation is well received and implemented.