



Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in Enlargement Countries – A Key Document Still Missing?

*For years, BCSDN has been following the EU's approach in supporting civil society in the Enlargement countries and advocating for civil society to be recognized and adequately supported as a competent partner in the EU enlargement process. We have regarded the **Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in Enlargement Countries, 2014-2020** as a key document that ensured a joint understanding of what enabling environment is, noting the preconditions that have to be in place in a country for civil society to be able to play a significant role in the countries' development and the accession process. Thus, being invested in their development, promotion and implementation, we consider it of utmost importance to **have the new Guidelines 2021-2027 published and adopted without any further delay**, while showing genuine consideration of the comments provided by civil society more than a year ago.*

For Enlargement countries, the Guidelines have put forward a **clear and coherent roadmap** of objectives and indicators telling us where countries stand and where they need to improve in order to advance in fulfilling the Political criteria for EU accession. Developed in an inclusive process, the Guidelines have been **crucial for building a joint understanding** of what are the standards in terms of civil society development that public authorities are expected to ensure, in order to achieve EU membership status. Although not a formal document, they have been used by the DG NEAR – to some extent – as a framework for monitoring and reporting on each candidate country's progress in this area, via the EC Annual Country Reports.

A process of reflection on the contribution of the Guidelines in improving the state of civil society in the Enlargement countries during the seven-year EU budget period cycle of 2014-2020 was initiated during 2020. At the end of the year, in light of the preparation of the new Guidelines for the period 2021-2027, consultations on the new Guidelines commenced, which lasted until March 2021. Yet, over a year after the consultations, there has been **no formal response on the feedback provided, nor have the Guidelines been published**.

To this end, we reiterate the main demand by civil society – to **strengthen the Guidelines' political weight** and formalize them. Not only would this give the much-needed political support to CSOs national advocacy efforts, it would also provide a **leverage for apt action towards Enlargement countries**, especially in cases of hostile environments for civil society. In cases of backsliding, a defined set of indicators from the Guidelines should be established that provide for **minimum conditions** against which IPA funding could be suspended or diverted. While the IPA III regulation specifies that “assistance could be suspended in event of the degradation of democracy, human rights or the rule of law”, it lacks concrete measures and fails to make a clear reference to the Guidelines.

The **DG NEAR should publish and adopt the new Guidelines** as soon as possible, including baselines against which each country can be monitored and assessed. An official policy and performance framework for civil society development – and not simply a programming one – that is **incorporated in the existing EU policy framework**, would give governments strong guidance on what needs to be done in the area of civil society, while setting a clear path for EU and EUDs to coherently provide both political and financial support to civil society in the Enlargement Countries. Finally, it would support CSOs' arguments and advocacy efforts for ensuring open civic space, and more genuine cooperation both with the governments and the EU.