



Meeting of Bulgarian civil society organizations on the OGP initiative (OGP)

Better government through openness

Minutes

The meeting took place on October 15, 2012 in the Access to Information Programme (AIP) office (Sofia, 76 "Vassil Levski" bul.).

The purpose of the meeting: To discuss the possible cooperation between NGOs who are involved in the consultation process on OGP and possible forms of communication with Government on OGP.

The participants:

Gergana Jouleva – Executive Director of the Access to Information Programme (AIP),
Ivanka Ivanova – Program Director of the Legal Program, Open Society Institute Sofia,
Antoaneta Tzoneva – Chairman of the Board of Institute for Public Environment Development
Milena Nedeva – Member of the Board of NGO Links
Irena Boneva – Subgrant Program Coordinator, Foundation for Local Government Reform
Svetla Kostadinova – Executive Director of the Institute for Market Economics
Darina Palova – Attorney-at-law, Legal Team, AIP
Fany Davidova – Lawyer, Legal Team, AIP
Stephan Anguelov – Lawyer, Legal Team, AIP
Ralitza Katzarska – Coordinator, AIP
Diana Bancheva – Communications Coordinator, AIP
Neven Dilkov – Member of the board of AIP, Managing Director of Neterra Communications

1. The NGO representatives pointed out their main interests in OGP:

Ivanka Ivanova, Open Society Institute (OSI) Sofia:

- OSI Sofia is going to be one of the operators of the "Norwegian fund" for Bulgarian NGOs which includes a priority on "Democracy and Human Rights" so they don't know if they are going to be able to participate in an NGO coalition on OGP in Bulgaria



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- Open Society Justice Initiative encourages the states participating in the OGP initiative to include in their action plans measures regarding the security sector – interior ministries, police, etc.
- In Bulgaria, we need an NGO coalition to support the including of the recommendations addressing the justice sector, internal affairs and security sector in the OGP action plan.
- As a result of previous efforts, the Ministry of Interior published for the first time in 2012 an annual report.
- Monitoring of the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Interior budgets is needed.
- Continuing of the civic monitoring of the Ministry of Interior activities is also needed.
- An interesting method increasing transparency in the justice system is *Court Watch*. It could be revamped.

Antoaneta Tzoneva, Institute for Public Environment Development (IPED):

- In early 2012, we launched the site Open Parliament (<http://openparliament.net/>) as a tool aiming at reporting the Bulgarian Parliament's work through automatically extracting and reusing data from the institution's site.
- A blog is working, in addition to the site, advocating for and reporting on open data, data journalism, etc. OGP is presented with interviews, translated materials.
- We are advocating for the use open formats especially in two public registers concerning the use European funds and the donations to political parties.

Milena Nedeva, NGO Links:

- NGO Links has worked in the area of government integrity which is related to open government.
- Since a month Ms. Nedeva is employed as an external expert by the Prime Minister's Head of political cabinet. She is responsible for the relations with NGOs, business and other interested parties for OGP.
- The government's staff working on OGP is quite limited in number. There is no administration unit in charge for OGP.

Fany Davidova, AIP:

- AIP is interested in the practical dimensions of the OGP initiative showing the real level of development of open government.
- AIP is monitoring the proactive disclosure of information and documents by government institutions under various laws.
- AIP is monitoring public registers and online access to those available.



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Irena Boneva, Foundation for Local Government Reform (FLGR):

- FLGR is one of the first to work for the implementation of the *one-stop-shop* approach on local level and unification of administrative services provided by Municipalities and Regional governments.
- FLGR developed a methodology for implementation of the 12 principles of good governance on the local level on the national Ombudsman's request.
- FLGR is monitoring the provision of public services by local authorities.
- FLGR as an Operator of the NGO Fund within the EEA FM 2004-2009 has supported NGO initiatives in the field of open and transparent governance at different levels

Svetla Kostadinova, Institute for Market Economics (IME):

- IME is monitoring state budgets and trying to explain them to the public. Hence, the provision of data in an understandable form is essential.
- IME is pressuring for publication of more data through participation in consultation meetings with officials and issuing opinions.
- In February 2012, IME submitted an opinion on the Bulgarian OGP action plan. Most of the suggestions from our statement were not included or were included only partly and not in depth.

2. Short presentation of the background and current developments related to OGP by Gergana Jouleva, AIP:

- In February 2011 Sandra Coliver from the Open Society Justice Initiative contacted AIP and discussed the possibility of Bulgaria joining the new global initiative Open Government Partnership.
- OGP was presented to the PM's Head of political cabinet Mrs. Rumiana Bachvarova.
- Bulgaria joined the initiative in September 2011.
- The national action plan was drafted after consultation with AIP and some other NGOs, three-part Council, National association of Municipalities. The process was lead by the PM's Head of political cabinet. Ms Bachvarova presented the National Action Plan (NAP) at the OGP conference in Brazil in April 2012. Ms Jouleva was invited to present comments on NAP at the same forum.
- In July 2012, an operational plan was adopted by the Council of Ministers, containing specific actions to be taken by the responsible government bodies. A revision of the Access to Public Information Act (APIA) is one of the plan's measures.
- Also related to this process is the revision of the EU Directive on the Re-use of Public Sector Information, introduced in Bulgarian law through the APIA.
- AIP and other NGOs are following the developments in the area concerning proactive disclosure of information, open data and open government.



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- In 2011 AIP conducted a review of all public registers, their contents, their formats, etc. which led to the creation of the PublicRegisters.info portal.
- On OGP itself – the background was presented, but also its structure and functioning.
- Special attention was paid to the Independent Reporting Mechanism and its role.
- Therefore Bulgarian NGOs should continue to participate in and conduct monitoring on that process, having in mind that every NGO only has knowledge and experience in certain fields and cooperation between civil society organizations is needed.

3. The possible forms of partnership among NGOs and partnership with the government?

- Gergana Jouleva proposed for discussion the following two subjects:
 - o Thinking on a form of cooperation between NGOs and government representatives. In Bulgaria many different bodies are responsible for the implementation of specific measures. So far there is no feedback and no evaluation of the action plan's execution. In Croatia, for example, there is a Public Council on OGP including NGOs and government officials. A similar solution may be possible in Bulgaria but different formats are possible. The question is: How to institutionalize the relationship between government and business, civil society and other organizations wishing to participate, to monitor?
 - o On monitoring – currently every CSO is conducting monitoring in its different field of expertise. It could be useful to organize periodic meetings and draft common opinions and recommendations.

4. Main points from discussion:

- It seemed that a significant number of the NGO representatives were insufficiently acquainted with the OGP functioning.
- Different suggestions were made on the proposed subjects and the form of the partnership. There are doubts on the government's capability and willingness to finance an OGP Council of some sort.
- Voluntary work by the CSOs in this area was proposed. The idea of a Council or some other form of partnership could come from the CSOs.
- Milena Nedeva informed that there is an idea circulating in government on organizing an international conference on OGP in Bulgaria.
- Some, but not all, of the NGO representatives seemed unconvinced by the Bulgarian participation in OGP so far, and by the overall benefits that OGP can produce in the country.
- Others stressed the role of civil society in the initiative and its importance as a policy tool.



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- All agreed that the National Action Plan measures are often too vague and need specifying. A significant number of similar measures exist in other Government plans or strategies prior to OGP. This was seen by some as a discredit, by others – as a possibility for action.
- Most of the NGO representatives agreed that their respective organizations are competent on some of the points in the action plan and could work with government on them or monitor their implementation.
- Suggestions were made to invite all interested government and non-government organizations, businesses and citizens for discussions (e.g. open data activists, other CSOs, etc.).
- **It was agreed that the minutes of the meeting are to be distributed to everyone on a common e-mail list. Then notes and proposals will be sent back (as a reply) to all. This should form a discussion group.**
- **On a next possible meeting other interested in the process organizations in general would be invited.**