



EUMAP: Advocating for Change

Some lessons learned in conducting advocacy in Europe's transition countries

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Summary

In the past five years, EUMAP has published monitoring reports highlighting a number of human rights and rule of law issues, and in the course of doing so, witnessed a substantial evolution in the capacity of local civil society to conduct advocacy. EUMAP has striven from the beginning to ensure that its monitoring reports go beyond an academic exercise and have a real social and political impact. Over the years, we have become well acquainted with our environment and have developed some advocacy lines that we would like to share here.

A region in rapid evolution

EUMAP, a program of the Open Society Institute (OSI), was created in 2001 with a double intent: to contribute to civil society's participation in the monitoring of human rights and rule of law issues; and to provide reliable information on the monitored areas to national governments and international bodies, such as the European Union (EU).

In the past five years, EUMAP has published monitoring reports highlighting a number of specific areas of human rights and rule of law issues¹, looking at the extent to which States conform to, or fall short of, European and international standards. EUMAP reports also examine ways in which EU and other international standards or policies can be further clarified or articulated, and offer recommendations to both national and international bodies on how specific shortcomings can be overcome.

In five years of activity in Europe's transition countries, during which EUMAP has cooperated with many local NGOs, we have witnessed a substantial evolution in the capacity of local civil society to actively participate in the elaboration and refinement of policy. First, civil society organisations in the region are clearly becoming more confident about their rights and duties to actively participate in the policy making process. In addition, decision makers are also becoming more open towards civil society. This is no small feat after decades of dictatorial regimes.

This enhanced dialogue between civil society and policy makers is still developing further. NGOs in the region are learning how to engage more effectively with decision makers, not just raising complaints, but substantiating them with reliable data and providing constructive suggestions for change. In short, they are creatively finding ways to not only be listened to, but to persuade officials to follow up with collaborative policies.

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I. Preparing useful reports

1. We work directly with local civil society: the monitoring for EUMAP reports is carried out by local – not international – experts, from the country being monitored, who are supported by local NGOs active in the specific field being monitored². This ensures a real sense of ownership and engagement on the part of the people the monitoring is focused on, which is key for the long-term impact of the monitoring.

2. Our draft and final reports are made available not only in English, but also in the local language/s. This is a very time consuming and costly exercise, which however we found could not be skipped if one wants to really engage locally and reach all the relevant actors at a local and national level, without whose involvement concrete change can not be achieved.
3. Our intent is to engage decision-makers in the various countries being monitored, not to antagonise them. Therefore, rather than using a denunciatory language, we privilege a constructive approach, presenting factual information in a substantiated and 'matter of fact' way. Although this 'softer tone' sometimes makes the task of attracting media interest more difficult, our reports are more likely to be accepted as reliable and useful by the decision makers to whom they are addressed.
4. In the same spirit of cooperation, rather than conflict, we work with maximum transparency. We make draft reports available in advance of publication, and invite all stakeholders to critique them and provide further information, or make corrections, during roundtable meetings organised in each country monitored. This approach aims to involve decision-makers throughout the process of preparing the reports. Given that our aim is to make stakeholders receptive for recommendations, we find that this approach works better than presenting them with the *fait accompli* of an assessment of their performance, for which they were never given the opportunity to present their own point of view.

II. Organising outreach activities well ahead

1. EUMAP reports are made available to the public and the media for the first time at a national or international launch event. This creates crucial momentum, as the event is likely to attract media coverage and the attention of experts and institutions. We therefore try to ensure, in advance, that all people with a say will either participate in the event, or are aware of the new report and its findings.
2. Reports, by their nature, can get out of date very quickly. We therefore try to make use of them as soon as possible after the launch event. We organise a mailing of copies of the printed reports to a large database of organisations, institutions and libraries, as well as e-mail announcements to a wider range of potentially interested individuals and NGOs, indicating where the reports can be found online. To avoid reaching only our own network of contacts, and overlooking potential new actors, we also use external mailing lists and net groups, and make it possible to subscribe online to the EUMAP newsletter. Though not particularly exciting, or cheap, the mailings are a key element of the advocacy campaign. They ensure that the reports reach the people who might have a use for them, either directly or via libraries, including online libraries, which serve to multiply the number of readers. To promote maximum access to the results of our monitoring, all reports, as well as the underlying methodologies, are also available online.
3. Together with our local partners, we try to build a real knowledge of the policy and media environment. This includes identifying the right officials or media to reach out to, anticipating the timing of relevant policy processes, and prioritising the information and recommendations from the report that can be of immediate use. If one sends a report to a minister, he or she might or might not get to read it, or even look at it. However, if one sends the same report to a junior officer at the moment when he or she is starting to draft a new law proposal, the report has a better chance of actually informing new policies.
4. Reports are not likely to produce effects from one day to the next, especially in countries where much needs to be done, and resources are scarce. Follow up activities in each country, or region, are therefore necessary, and must be tuned to the specific findings of the monitoring in each country or region.

III. Combining national and international advocacy

1. International advocacy is not just useful for its own sake. It will in turn have a real impact on the national level, as messages are channelled (back) into the national debate, through the response of international organisations or foreign and national media.
2. International organisations and national governments should be, or should be turned into, allies. In principle, they (should) have the same interest as civil society: to improve the situation where there is a need.
3. We find that national and international public officials will in general welcome valuable information from NGOs. They are eager to receive more detailed information about situations on which the amount of available statistic and reliable information is scarce. Also, in democratic regimes, they can be addressed with reference to their duty to listen to civil society actors.
4. To be meaningful, information shared with both government and international officials, and the media, must be tailored to their needs. International officials, like national ones and media representatives, usually cannot spend much time reading lengthy reports. Also, they might need specific information at a specific moment only. It is therefore important to be familiar with the needs and timing of the policy process, and to provide purpose-made briefings, rather than relying on uniform press releases or announcements. On the international level too, the impact of the information will be enhanced by identifying the officials to whom it can be of most immediate use, and establishing personal contacts beyond email outreach.

Conclusions

These are general remarks from our experience. Like every other civil society organisation, we learn more every day about what works and what is not worth our resources and energy, and try to act on it.

The one lesson we have learned very clearly is that advocacy should accompany every step of our work and not only be thought of as an 'ad hoc' PR campaign. Advocacy must be an integral part of everything we do.

'Advocacy' and 'core activity' must nonetheless be seen as separate activities. 'Core activities' are the underlying work on which advocacy is based (like, in EUMAP's case, the actual monitoring, or in other organisations' cases, the daily work with a vulnerable group). These "core activities" involve directly a certain number of people (such as EUMAP's reporters and interviewees, or in the case of a local NGO, its activists and the people it works with).

Advocacy, meanwhile, aims to use the experience that is accumulated with the core activity as a tool to inform, influence, and promote policy. Advocacy therefore addresses an *undefined* number of *external* actors (decision makers, media, other NGOs, the public at large, etc.).

The two activities, "core activity" and "advocacy", thus function in parallel, but according to a different logic. To function well, the two need to be run separately, while also being completely tuned to each other. This is no small task for any organisation!

More EUMAP suggestions and further discussion on advocacy work in Europe's transition countries can also be found in the piece "ADVOCACY: Are civil society organisations any good at it? (And what exactly IS it anyway?)" -- Results of an EUMAP survey³.

¹ See <http://www.eumap.org/topics>

² See <http://www.eumap.org/about>

³ See <http://www.eumap.org/journal/features/2006/advocacy/survey>