

## **The process of the Concept for the Estonian Civil Society Development (EKAK)**

*In December 2002 the Concept for the Estonian Civil Society Development (EKAK) was approved by the Estonian parliament. From October 2003 the concept put in practice by a joint commission formed at the Ministry of Inner Affairs of civil associations and open sector. In reality this means that this commission is organizing the financial support of the more active civil associations and helping them to find activity partners.*

The Estonian Civil society development concept (EKAK) is a national document, which describes the different roles of government and nonprofit organizations in cooperation between the public sector and nonprofit sector. The general purpose of this document is to prove that there is mutual understanding between government and nonprofit organizations concerning their cooperation. The specific aims of EKAK are related to supporting the development of a civil society in Estonia.

The work of drawing up the drafts of the Estonian Civil society development concept took place from 1999 until February 2001 in the framework of the UNDP, Estonian Government and the Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations project **“Strengthening Estonia’s NGOs’ Sustainability”** managed by the Network of Estonian Non-profit Associations and Foundations.

The first draft of EKAK was put together by the coordinator of the UNDP’s project. The draft was based on the materials by all the working groups which worked on concept in 1999 – 2000.

There were a number of stages in the process of drawing up the concept and many actors participated in the process. The nonprofit sector has played the most active role in this process, while the representatives of political parties have been involved in only some stages of developing the concept.

In December 1999,

10 Estonian parties and 10 organizations signed a Memorandum of Cooperation between Estonian Political Parties and Nonprofit Sector Umbrella Organizations. A

formal decision of starting preparations for the draft of Estonian Civil society development concept and the decision to present this document to the Estonian Parliament – Riigikogu was contained in the Memorandum.

From January – April 2000,

the first draft of the EKAK was developed by the working groups including the representatives of umbrella organizations and academicians.

In April 2000,

this first draft was discussed at the meeting of Cultural committee of Riigikogu. In conclusion, the Cultural committee required the draft document to be written anew with the help of academic experts and **research**, also other parliamentary committees were to be involved in the process as well.

From June - December 2000,

research group conducted a series of open-ended individual and group interviews with 71 men and women who were classified either as academic experts, civil servants, politicians, local government officials, business people, or NGO activists.

In October 2000,

the preliminary results of survey and the second draft of concept was introduced to the members of parliament and to the representatives of nonprofit sector at the seminar of three parliament committees (committee of culture, committee of social affairs and constitutional committee).

From October 2000 – January 2001,

the second draft of concept was introduced at 15 regional meetings of Estonian NGOs. More than 400 people participated in these meetings representing more than 450 NGOs. In these meetings, the draft concept was introduced by the academic experts and it was well discussed with the participants. A lot of proposals and amendments were made and most of them were approved by the expert group. A new version of the EKAK was published in a national daily on 27th October 2000, and it was sent to 3,000 organizations by e-mail as well.

On February, 1, 2001,

the final results of the survey were introduced to the members of parliament, the representatives of NGOs and the journalists.

On February, 3. 2001,

The Roundtable of Estonian nonprofit organizations was held in Tallinn where EKAK was approved.

On April, 23 2001,

Estonian Civil society development concept was presented by the representative council of the Roundtable of Estonian nonprofit organizations to the Parliament for discussion and acceptance as a parliamentary document.

From October 2001 – April 2002,

EKAK was discussed by the commission of representatives of three Parliamentary Committees – those of cultural, constitutional, and social affairs and the members of representative council.

In June 2002,

a final, several times re-drafted version of this document was presented to the Estonian Parliament for discussion and eventual adoption.

This was the three-year long birth story of EKAK. Hopefully soon it will appear in the agenda of Estonian Parliament.

In the last part of my presentation, I would like to stress the importance the drafting of EKAK had to the nonprofit sector in Estonia as a whole.

During the discussions on EKAK, the idea of **an open all-Estonian forum** of the nonprofit organizations was born and brought to life. The first meeting of this forum, called Roundtable of Estonian nonprofit organizations was held in February 2001. The 272 participants were divided in five chambers: registered nonprofit organizations; umbrella organizations; foundations; non-registered nonprofit organizations (informal partnerships); and organizations for minorities. These chambers delegated three representatives each (five from the largest chamber, that of registered non-profit organizations) to the Representative Council of the

Roundtable. The Roundtable has not registered itself as a legal entity and has no fixed membership. Thus, the Representative Council is to be elected every year simply by the organizations that have sent their representatives to the Roundtable.

In the course of preparation of the Civil Society Development Concept, the Estonian NGOs produced a group of leading activists with clear ideas about the **role of NGOs as elements of civil society**. Through the popularization of the EKAK by the NGO Roundtable, the idea of nonprofit organizations having an important role in developing participatory democracy will continue to be spread within the sector. Thanks to the Representative Council of the Roundtable, this idea has also been noticed by the political parties who have put it as an item on their agenda.

EKAK has been a good catalyst in promoting civil society in Estonia. Besides EKAK, the nonprofit sector has drafted and the Roundtable of Estonian Nonprofit organizations has approved a number of other important documents for the nonprofit sector. Among them are such important documents as the Code of Ethics for Estonian Nonprofit Organizations and the document on sustainability of the Estonian civil society and NPOs. Several local roundtables of NPOs have emerged and the first cooperation agreements have been concluded between the local authorities and the local roundtables.

The cooperation process between the public and the nonprofit sector has been started in Estonia and is constantly spreading.

The text is mainly extracts from a speech by Ülle Lepp  
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Roundtable of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations