

Brussels, 23 March 2017

**Address of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
at the Joint Meeting of the Euronest PA Committee on Political Affairs, Human Rights and
Democracy and Committee on Social Affairs, Education, Culture and Civil Society**

Freedom of the Media in the EaP Countries

Dear Co-Chairs,

Dear Members of the European Parliament,

Dear colleagues,

The heterogeneity of Eastern Partnership region did not decline since the launch of the initiative in 2009. Differences among states are reflected in the sphere of media freedom.

According to the rating of Reporters without Borders, Azerbaijan and Belarus fall into the bottom category with independent media practically non-existent, while Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia and Georgia are ranked “fairly good”, each of them with a specific set of challenges identified by the country researchers of this study.

Freedom House provides a more detailed picture on the status quo: Georgia, with the score 49 (the smaller the figure, the better is the record on freedom of the press), Ukraine (53) and Moldova (56) appear in a group of countries with “partly free” media. Armenia is close to the three Eastern Partnership frontrunners (63), but falls already in the category of “not free”, together with Azerbaijan (89) and Belarus (91).

The data from both Reporters without Borders and Freedom House summarize the situation in 2016. Only Ukraine and Belarus progressed, the other 4 countries show a worse performance compared to the previous year. The last data is alarming, if we consider that 2015 was the worst year since 1980, when Freedom House started its rating, in terms of average score of all examined countries (199 during the last years).

Concerns become even stronger when we consider the freedom of the internet, which plays a growing role in the information environment of all 6 countries. According to Freedom House, Georgia is the only country in the region ranked as “free” with the score 25. Armenia (30), Ukraine (38), Azerbaijan (57) are in the category of “partly free” countries, and Belarus (63) is among the

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“not free”. All five countries (Moldova was not ranked in 2016) performed worse in comparison to 2015.

The EaP Civil Society Forum keeps the situation of the media in focus. The Media Freedom working subgroup (recently renamed Media and Security subgroup) operates within the CSF since 2009 and it is now the biggest subgroup in the Forum, gathering 24 member organizations of the EaP CSF. Approximately the same number of other journalism and media NGOs remains in more or less regular contact and cooperates with the subgroup.

One of the traditions in the subgroup is conducting monitoring on the state of media in the EaP region. As a result of these efforts, the Eastern Partnership Media Freedom Index was established. The quality of research outputs allowed for advocating reforms in the media industry, exchanging experiences, following the dynamics of change. We consider the initiation of Eastern Partnership Media Conferences (in line with Business Foras and Civil Society Conferences) in the margins of the EaP summits as a recognition of the importance of journalists’ work in the region. The first media conference took place in Riga in May 2015, allowing to formulate the priorities for the development of the industry and to elaborate responses to new challenges. The second one is expected to take place in Kyiv in September 2017.

Despite the differences in the state of media mentioned above, there are several common features among the EaP countries. This first refers to economic situation. Across the region, advertising markets are weak and media monopolies prevail on a national level, controlled either by the governments or by large private holdings (oligarchies), resulting in varying levels of editorial politicisation.

Public service broadcasting (PSB) remains problematic. It does not exist in Belarus. In Azerbaijan it operates in parallel with the state TV, and there are no many differences between the two in terms of plurality. In Armenia and Moldova PSB remains under strong control of the government. In Georgia some promising processes happen from time to time, with civil society criticism against political bias increasing during elections periods. In Ukraine, the transition from state to public broadcasting is finalized on the national level, and we just hope that the reform will endure.

During recent months, the EaP CSF and its National Platforms reacted to several challenging developments in the region. On 17 March 2017, the Belarusian NP issued a statement saying that in the course of March 2017, mass peaceful protests of citizens as a reaction to the adoption of the Presidential Decree No. 3 "On preventing social dependency" have been taking place in Belarus.

“In disregard of the Constitutional provisions on freedom of speech and assembly, in many cities around Belarus, mass arbitrary arrests with excessive use of force against protesting citizens, civic activists, politicians, human rights defenders, as well as journalists covering socially significant events, have taken place almost daily”.

Earlier on 2 January 2017, our Belarusian colleagues expressed their “concern over the future of the independent channel Belsat TV. The Polish government intends to significantly cut the funding for the TV channel and stop broadcasting in Belarusian language. Belsat TV is an independent television project targeting the Belarusian audience, which operates under difficult conditions due to the discrimination of independent media and the lack of freedom of information. The vast majority of Belsat TV programs are produced by Belarusian journalists, as well as a wide range of experts and opinion leaders”. In support to Belarusian civil society, the EaP CSF organized an advocacy mission of its Steering Committee to Poland, and we hope that a consistent solution will be found on this matter.

On 15 March 2017, members of the EaP CSF Azerbaijani National Platform condemned “the verdict of the Surakhany District Court as of 2 March 2017 on the two-year sentence for Mehman Huseynov, Chairman of the Institute for Reporters’ Freedom and Safety (IRFS Azerbaijan), and consider this judgment to be another blow to the civil society and freedom of expression in Azerbaijan”.

Earlier, on 7 March 2017, 24 Human rights institutions, including the EaP CSF, issued a statement, saying that “at least 13 journalists, bloggers and media workers are currently detained in Azerbaijan on false allegations for expressing critical views” on the leadership of the country. Reliable sources, according to the statement, “report numerous cases of torture and degrading treatment against detainees”. The recent case with Mehman Huseynov is remarkable as the blogger, contrary to all previous persecuted journalists and bloggers, was convicted for defamation, which highlights the need for decriminalization of defamation in Azerbaijan.

The last 8th CSF Annual Assembly (28-29 November 2016) on initiative of the Armenian National Platform adopted a resolution where in line with several other underlined the problem of impunity of representatives of law enforcement bodies using excessive force against participants of protest rallies, including dozens of journalists. Despite the significant amount of photo and video evidences proving the responsibilities of high ranked police officers, only few low level policemen were convicted recently by the courts with modest fines. Armenian civil society considers these

light punishments as a message to power structures to continue perpetrating abuses against the protesters.

Ukraine also remains a place where safety of journalists is not guaranteed. On 25 July 2016, the Steering Committee condemned “the murder of the journalist Pavel Sharamet in Kyiv and called “on Ukrainian authorities to identify the killers and instigators of the crime and to speedily bring them to justice”. In its statement, the EaP CSF referred several times to the human rights situation in Crimea and during the opening of the Annual Assembly featured the presentation of the Forum’s **Pavel Sheremet Award** to the jailed Crimean journalist **Mykola Semena**, in recognition for his courage to risk his safety and freedom in the cause of the media freedom.

Although the EaP CSF did not release any statement on media freedom in Georgia and Moldova, we perfectly acknowledge also problems existing there: level of concentration of media ownership in Moldova is unprecedented even for our region, alleged political background behind property disputes in Georgia – current Rustavi-2 case looks like continuation of previous precedents with the same TV company 15 years ago, as well as later conflicts around Imedi and Maestro TV companies.

One more common and relatively new (by its scale) challenge for all the EaP countries is the external propaganda destroying mutual understanding. Taking advantage of the common information space still existing in post-Soviet countries, Russian propaganda shapes political views of audiences in 6 countries of the region by fostering hate speech, discrimination, xenophobia, animosity and instability in the societies. Weak local independent media are unable to ensure resilience against propaganda wars frequently fueled from abroad. Belarus, Armenia and Moldova are the most vulnerable among the EaP countries in this sense. Although some protection measure have been put in place in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine to limit the dissemination of external propaganda, the destructive influence of the latter reaches local media as well, which contribute to the spread to propaganda narratives themselves. Two recent studies conducted with the financial assistance of the EaP CSF allowed to examine new elements of Russian propaganda mobilized during last three years against the EU and its initiatives, including the Eastern Partnership, as well as the influence made by this manipulative content on the national media in the EaP countries. Respective policy recommendations are results of those studies.

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