

26 June 2018, Brussels

**Address by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
at the Seventh Ordinary Session of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly**

Dear Euronest members,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you in the name of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Civil Society Forum (CSF) and to underline that, quite suddenly, we have all found ourselves living in interesting times for the Partnership.

In Armenia, the government has been swept away by street demonstrations that have opened the way to reforms in the spirit of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which will lead to a better, freer and a happier society. This has happened without violence. This speaks volumes about the maturity of Armenian society including its former leaders who stepped aside in the face of the popular demands but also of Russia, Armenia's main ally, which so far has watched events take their course with equanimity. Indeed, it is in all our interests to support and defend this Armenian dash for change in the EaP and events in Armenia have already been followed by protests against perceived injustice elsewhere.

In Georgia, demonstrations over the investigation of two deaths in a brawl between schoolboys have led to the resignation of the Prime Minister and the Prosecutor General, and pointed to the urgent need for a deepening of reforms, including changes in the Prosecutors' Office where proposals for change have been submitted to the Parliament by the Georgian National Civil Society Platform.

In Moldova, a pro-European candidate won the mayoral election in Chisinau and the subsequent invalidation of the election by the city court sparked demonstrations underlining the need for reforms in the country's legal system.

Even in Azerbaijan, a handful of families of political prisoners have taken to the streets to protest against the imprisonment of their loved ones challenging the authorities' reliance on repression as a response to legitimate demands for change. Now, regrettably, the authorities are pursuing a campaign to bar independent defence lawyers from acting in cases where human rights defenders are involved.

Rule of law issues that have been identified as a priority in the Eastern Partnership's 2020 Deliverables programme have emerged as the area where reforms are most urgently needed if corruption is to be contained and the power of local oligarchs curbed.

Happily, the European Parliament is well aware of these developments thanks to MEPs such as Rebecca Harms and Heidi Hautala.

The European Commission and the EEAS are more cautious as, for example, they pursue a Partnership Agreement with Baku, which threatens, to sideline human rights concerns despite warnings from the European Parliament.

We see the European Parliament as an important partner. We welcome the recently adopted resolution on Georgian occupied territories ten years after the Russian invasion and express our appreciation to the Parliament and the European Union, which has reaffirmed its unequivocal support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia.

The current discussions on the structure of the 2021-2027 multi-annual budget are also worrying us given the important role envisaged for civil society in the EaP. The proposals appear to envisage that most of the external funding instruments would be unified under one „Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation” instrument. This threatens a downgrading of the Eastern dimension in the EU external funding and within it the priority given to civil and human rights promotion and in that to civil society.

To stop this from happening clear guidelines must be put into place to ensure that the current structure and approach to civil society support under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), including the Civil Society Facility, will be maintained and improved, allowing for a greater flexibility and facilitating the EU support in places where independent CSOs find it difficult to operate. Civil society in Georgia is working closely with their authorities to lobby in Brussels for a new multi multi-annual budget for the associated countries. We look to other EaP partner governments such as Moldova and Ukraine to follow suit. It is also crucial to maintain support for the eastern dimension of the EU external policy and genuine support for civil society, which should be consulted on the content of the instruments.

It would be indeed a great pity that as we enter a time of hope in the EaP, the EU would be de facto considering a shift away from its commitment to human and civil rights and to civil society, which remains one of the crucial agents of change in the EaP.

Thank you for your attention.

*Delivered by Krzysztof Bobinski and Alexandra Kalatozishvili,
Co-chairs of the EaP CSF Steering Committee*