

## Press Release

### Moment of truth for the Eastern Partnership as the EU falters in winning the hearts and minds of its neighbours

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#### ***Back to basics – the EU relations with its Eastern neighbours should be built on shared values, rule of law and public accountability***

Ahead of the 5<sup>th</sup> Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit bringing together the leaders of the EU and neighbouring states in Brussels tomorrow, a civil society watchdog calls for a transparent and ambitious foreign policy. The Civil Society Forum, mobilising NGOs, think tanks and grassroots movements from all over the region and the EU, calls for the political vision, support for pluralism, and human rights to be put at the core of the EU's eastward policy.

It is crunch time for the EU and its Eastern neighbours, as Russia's influence in the region is growing stronger despite the EU's initiative to create a 'ring of friends' at the eastern border. Millions of people are still not aware of what the cooperation with the EU can bring and do not have a full access to human rights that were fought for on the Maidan and across the region.

A month ago, 130 NGOs signed an alternative [Declaration addressed to the Summit](#) in Tallinn. They reiterated the benefits of cooperating with the Eastern partners in a multilateral format, acknowledged the importance of the neighbours' European aspirations and resilience while ensuring a structured engagement with the civil society. Even though in its [working document](#) with the outlook for 2020 the EU provides for a significant involvement of the civil society actors, so far the status quo does not guarantee a policy shaping role civil society merits.

*“The leaders should make sure that empowering civil society and providing it with enabling environment becomes a real commitment, not a mere promise on paper. This is essential for achieving the goals of the Eastern Partnership. Diplomacy should be matched by a comparable and compatible support to the civil society still struggling to be accepted by the governments as an equal partner. Genuine empowerment will enable it to meaningfully engage in implementing reforms and bringing tangible results for the citizens of the Eastern Partnership countries, especially local communities,”* commented Natalia Yerashevich, Director of the EaP CSF Secretariat based in Brussels.

Several governments of the Eastern partners are still sceptical about how much leeway the civil society should be given in monitoring the progress on reforms and offering policy solutions. Since civil society is committed to promoting the European values, effectively empowering it and taking the cooperation to a new level is to the EU's advantage if it truly wants to reach out to the citizens of the EaP countries.

The Eastern Partnership launched 8 years ago was designed to bring the neighbours closer to the European Union. However, even after the revision of the policy approach two years ago, it is often seen as not ambitious enough by some of the Eastern partners and too ambitious by the others. The Summit is held amidst the rising tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the wording for the official Declaration regarding the conflicts in the region, while Lukashenka is sending a signal that the recent thaw in relations does not suffice for him to attend the high-level meeting. At the same



time, Georgia and Moldova are facing criticism of election systems' reforms, and Ukraine is striving for more political commitment from the EU.

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**Notes to editors:**

**About the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum**

*The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) is a unique multi-layered regional civil society platform aimed at promoting European integration, facilitating reforms and democratic transformations in the six Eastern Partnership countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Serving as the civil society and people-to-people dimension of the Eastern Partnership, the EaP CSF strives to strengthen civil society in the region, boost pluralism in public discourse and policy making by promoting participatory democracy and fundamental freedoms. For more information, please visit [the EaP CSF website](#).*

**For further information about the event and the EaP CSF, please contact:**

**Darya Mustafayeva**

EaP CSF Communications Manager

Email: [darya.mustafayeva@eap-csf.eu](mailto:darya.mustafayeva@eap-csf.eu)

Phone: [+32 486 27 49 47](tel:+32486274947); [+32 2893 2585](tel:+3228932585)