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**Jean-Claude Juncker**, President, European Commission

**Martin Schulz**, President, European Parliament

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**Johannes Hahn**, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations

**Ministers of Foreign Affairs**, EU Member States

**Thorbjørn Jagland**, Secretary General, Council of Europe

**Pedro Agramunt**, President, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

**Lamberto Zannier**, Secretary General, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

**Ilkka Kanerva**, President, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

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### **Statement**

#### **by the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on recent and forthcoming elections.**

A series of elections and referenda in Eastern Partnership countries between September 2016 and next spring prompts us to consider the way these basic tools of the democratic system are being managed by rulers and ruled and to question if these elections do indeed legitimise governments or merely serve to underpin the corrupt rule of local oligarchs.

Firstly, the members of the Steering Committee express their gratitude for the efforts of local election monitors who at times risk their health and personal liberty to perform an essential service for the cause of democracy by reporting on what actually happens before and on voting day. The essential work of monitors from ODIHR who observe elections in the name of the OSCE is also worthy of praise as they provide vitally important assessments of the probity of elections in the Eastern Partnership countries and elsewhere.

The parliamentary election in **Belarus** on 11 September 2016 was a disappointment as despite an evident improvement in relations between that country and the European Union our National Platform in Belarus declared that the election „can't be considered democratic, free and open". At the same time the International Election Observation Mission which included OSCE/ODIHR identified many shortcomings in among others early, voting counting and tabulation of the results.

**Azerbaijan** failed to invite OSCE/ODIHR to its constitutional referendum on 26 September 2016 while the local Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDSC) reported that the „referendum failed to meet election legislation and international commitments of the

country with regards to democratic elections”. This verdict was backed by several video films which showed blatant ballot stuffing by voters, apparently undisturbed by election officials. These films gave the lie to positive judgements reportedly delivered by individual observers from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) on the conduct of the referendum.

In **Georgia** on 8 October 2016 the ongoing parliamentary election was judged positively by the International Election Observation Mission which included OSCE/ODIHR and which said „fundamental freedoms were generally respected”. However, despite the positive conduct of the election by the Central Election Commission, cases of the misuse of ‘administrative resources’ were judged by observers to be ‘numerous’ and incidents of violence at voting stations showed the public consensus around the view that voting is a peaceful way of taking political decisions, remains fragile.

A forthcoming presidential election in **Moldova** on 30 October 2016 will test the political resilience of the country’s political system which has been greatly undermined by political corruption. It thus imperative that the election be free and fair and to be seen as such by the population. For only such an outcome can lay the foundations of an effort to rebuild popular trust in the country’s democratic future.

A similar test lies before the government and people of **Armenia** who will be asked to vote in a parliamentary election next spring. The demonstrations last July in Yerevan showed that there is a basic lack of trust between rulers and ruled which could flare into public disorder with tragic consequences if the result of the election is seen to be manipulated by the authorities.

Elections in the Eastern Partnership countries remain a subject of primary concern for civil society as our organisations can only function properly in an environment which is governed by democratically elected institutions which have the legitimacy to uphold the rule of law.

The Steering Committee calls on the member organisations of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum to do their utmost to uphold this principle. Also we appeal to political parties in the European Union to unequivocally support such efforts for a free and fair political system in the Eastern Partnership. These political parties must not turn a blind eye to numerous incidents of electoral fraud in the Eastern Partnership for personal gain or for political or economic advantage. Such behaviour only serves to undermine the values which these parties say they uphold.

*Members of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum*