

19 June 2017, Luxembourg

**Address by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
to the Eastern Partnership Ministerial Meeting**

Dear High Representative, Commissioner, Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for this opportunity to address this Eastern Partnership Ministerial meeting on behalf of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. It is an honour for us to take part in the Ministerial Meetings and share the civil society vision on the state of the Eastern Partnership policy and its perspectives.

This meeting is a good opportunity to take stock of the current cooperation and discuss the ways to strengthen multilateral and bilateral tracks five months before the 5th Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels.

We welcome the recent endeavours to further develop and refine the Eastern Partnership (EaP) as a comprehensive policy. We support the acknowledgment of the strengthened role for the civil society in achieving the goals of the Eastern Partnership and in particular the recognition of the cross-cutting nature of the civil society as specified in the Joint Staff Working Document “Eastern Partnership - 20 Deliverables for 2020”. We underline the importance of enabling environment for civil society along with gender equality and non-discrimination, as well as communicating the results of the EaP to the societies in the EaP and the EU which will bring the policy closer to the citizens.

The Civil Society Forum commented on the deliverables in the above-mentioned document focusing on both cross-cutting and sectoral priorities. We believe the document will serve as a good roadmap for tracking the progress of the EaP and will ensure the accountability of all the actors. We would like to stress that in addition to its monitoring and watchdog function, CSOs should be considered as actors responsible for implementation alongside the governments in most of the areas, but in particular in the field of rule of law, anti-corruption and judicial reforms. Currently, the CSOs are included as actors in less than 20% of the milestones, though their capacity has grown considerably in recent years.

We commend the increased involvement of the EaP CSF in policy dialogue by the EU which reflects the growing legitimacy of the Forum and the civil society in general and its recognition as one of the policymaking actors. The Forum and the broader civil society should be given opportunities for a more meaningful engagement and performing its functions.

At the moment, the EaP CSF has at its disposal several important instruments that have proven to be useful for the policy dialogue with the EU and the partner countries. The EaP Index, an annual assessment of integration progress in the 6 partner countries presents valuable comparable data to trace the results of the implemented EaP policies. Ad hoc monitoring missions to EaP countries in pre- or post-crisis situations by civil society experts provide an opportunity to assess the situation on

the ground from the civil society perspective. Such missions to Armenia in 2016 and to Belarus in 2017 have proven to be useful and effective.

Now I would like to present some ideas on the new EaP multilateral architecture. It is crucial that the EaP CSF continues to be an integral part of the multilateral track. We support the demand for a better planned and coordinated cross-sectoral activity within the EaP policy as laid out in a non-paper prepared by a number of EU Member States. Against this backdrop, we consider it necessary to ensure an active role of the Forum in preparation of the annual programs and more meaningful participation in coordination meetings that would not be limited to delivering statements but would also include participation in further deliberations. We also call for a better coordination among the multitude of actors involved in the EaP policy.

We welcome the Joint Communication on Resilience providing a more integrated approach towards neighbouring countries in terms of stability and security. While the concept of state and societal resilience is undergoing a development phase, the EaP CSF is ready to be involved in this process. We propose, in joint effort with the governments of the EaP partner states and the EU institutions, to create a comprehensive mechanism for assessment of societal resilience in order to monitor the policy implementation.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The first half of 2017 was rich in positive developments. To name a few, visa-free regimes granted to Georgia and Ukraine, initialing new agreement between the EU and Armenia, on-going negotiations on the new agreement with Azerbaijan. These achievements prove that the reform agenda pays off. However, we should not forget that millions of citizens in the EaP countries still do not enjoy the human rights and democratic values on which the Eastern Partnership has been built. The track record of the EaP policy implementation has shown that there are only limited and reversible reform results if the democratic principles and rule of law are not observed.

The civil society is deeply concerned about the political and economic control exercised by the Russian authorities in the region, namely through energy policy instruments, propaganda and destabilization of the targeted regions. In this respect, we consider it vital both for the EU and EaP countries to boost the integration processes, enhance energy security, increase investments in renewable energy and strengthen key institutions. Better communication tools should be developed to ensure objective information and challenge the propaganda. We call **on the EU** to reconsider creating a separate CSDP intergovernmental platform to deal with a wide range of security issues.

At the same time, the issues like environmental governance reform should not be side-lined. We strongly urge the EaP governments to prioritize environmental and climate change policies based on the EU standards, which guarantee sustainable development of the EaP region. We call on **the EU** to closely monitor the dangerous reforms of the environmental institutions in some EaP countries where ministries of environment are being shut down (e.g. Moldova and Belarus).

We call on **the EU** to keep the EaP policy high on its agenda accompanied with the relevant financial support. At the same time, the EU should be clearer about the concrete results to be achieved, hold the

EaP governments fully accountable for their delivery, and should not shy away from applying conditionality.

We call on **Armenian** authorities to end political persecutions and politically motivated criminal charges against civic activists and people with divergent political views who participated in the peaceful assemblies in July 2016. Such persecutions are marked being the repetition of the practice applied by the Government to suppress the political dissent and civic activism in the country instituted earlier in 2008. Meantime, the impunity of police should be eradicated to hold everyone accountable for the brutal violations of human rights during the peaceful assemblies in July 2016. Furthermore, the authorities should ensure the effective application of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly in Armenia. The judicial reform should properly address the recommendations of international organizations and the local civil society organisations should be engaged in the process of development, implementation and monitoring of the reform. The deliberations and approval of the law on domestic violence and anti-discrimination should proceed immediately.

We call on **Azerbaijan** authorities to release more than 160 political prisoners who are held in custody or jailed in the country, including Ilgar Mammadov, Afgan Mukhtarli, Ali Insanov, Aziz Orujov, and many others. We call on **the EU** to raise this matter in all meetings and negotiations with the government of Azerbaijan. We call on the government to provide a favourable environment for the civil society by amending the NGO legislation and removing administrative barriers to CSOs' functioning and funding. We call on the government of Azerbaijan to take immediate action to address the abuse of citizens' civil and political rights, as well as torture and ill-treatment of prisoners.

We call on the **Belarusian** authorities to adhere to their reform commitments and take concrete steps in respecting the fundamental freedoms and rights. We call for the freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of expression to be included into EU-Belarus dialogue agenda. The EU-Belarus relations strategy should be built on the conditionality approach with result-oriented reform activities and a clear participatory and monitoring mandate for the civil society.

We call on the **Georgian** authorities to investigate thoroughly the appalling case of the abduction of the Azerbaijani journalist **Afgan Mukhtarli**. This case is a culmination of a series of recent actions that should make the life of exiled civil society activists in Georgia more difficult. We also call on the government to reaffirm its enthusiasm and commitment to the reform process and to strengthen its policy outreach to the regions. The draft Constitutional Amendment law must respect the principle of fair elections and provide for a fair electoral environment.

In **Moldova**, the government's attempts to speed up reforms have not been credible enough. The selective prosecution of high-profile public figures has taken place, while the good governance principles were compromised by the attempts of the government to impose the change of the electoral system. In the energy sector, the government failed to adopt the framework legislation ensuring a strong and independent regulator. Furthermore, although the mechanism of transparent procurement of electricity entered into force, the authorities follow a non-transparent practice buying electricity from Transnistria. We call on the EU institutions to closely monitor the actions of the government and support active engagement of Moldovan civil society organisations in monitoring the reforms. We call on the **Moldovan** government to stop harassment of its critics from the civil society and to

continue investigations into the major bank fraud case, with perpetrators punished and stolen assets rapidly recovered.

Although the **Ukrainian** path of reforms has been positively assessed by the EU, there are still some challenges threatening to hinder the progress. We call on the Ukrainian authorities to double their efforts in tackling corruption and in reforming judiciary system and public administration. We urge them to stop the pressure on civic activists engaged in anti-corruption activities. At the same time, the already implemented reforms should be irreversible. To this end, more political will and institutional capacity is needed to deliver on the commitments. The **EU** support is essential both in terms of reforms process and fighting Russian aggression and its devastating consequences. More attention should be paid to the initiative of some EU member states to elaborate à la “Marshall plan” to assist Ukraine.

Let me conclude with a phrase, which, I believe, was coined in the corridors of the EU institutions: “If we do not export stability outside the EU, we will import instability inside it.” The civil society is a suitable partner in both boosting such an export and in preventing the dangerous import.

Thank you for your attention.

*Delivered by Hennadiy Maksak, Co-Chair of the EaP CSF Steering Committee,
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