

12 March 2018, Brussels

**Address by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
at the launch event of the new structure for the Eastern Partnership**

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum is happy to have the opportunity to share our ideas and to deliver on our commitments as civil society. We strongly believe that the Eastern Partnership policy provides an indispensable framework for the EU's relations with its Eastern neighbours.

We are ready to meaningfully participate in the EaP architecture and we strongly believe that the EaP CSF participation in all meetings and discussions of panels and platforms will greatly benefit the process. Providing civil society with stable and long-term engagement, where the civil society experts can share their policy advice and have a genuine impact, goes beyond the standard consultation process. This is the added value of the Civil Society Forum involvement. We see our role to be that of an equal partner in the planning, developing and monitoring of the policy and its implementation in the framework of but not limited to the 2020 Deliverables. Facilitating a meaningful participation of the civil society is important in our ability to hold governments accountable and protect human rights, transparency and democratic governance.

The EaP CSF has already started to adapt to the renewed design defined at the EaP summit and we are ready to pursue this path.

It has to be added that the reforms envisaged by the 2020 Deliverables agenda can only work if they are backed by a genuine commitment to democratic change on the part of the political leaderships of the EaP countries and if the EU member states and institutions firmly push for such a change.

There are some positive developments in the three member states who are implementing Association Agreements but there are also plenty of challenges across the region.

Armenia

In Armenia the EU should promote a meaningful and structured involvement of the civil society in the process of preparation and implementation of the CEPA roadmap. The setup of the bilateral civil society platform under CEPA should be inclusive and based on the existing structures of pro-European CSOs like the EaP CSF Armenian National Platform. The recent Draft Law on "The structure and activities of the Government" violates the principles of transparency and public accountability and envisages that the Government sessions will be held behind closed doors starting from the day the President-elect takes office. The limitations on the independence of judiciary, prosecution and investigation agencies through the appointment mechanisms where all decision and assignment powers are centralized within the ruling party are extremely worrisome. Finally, politically motivated prosecutions and punishment of people with divergent views is still a part of Armenian reality as can be seen in the case of Andreas Ghukasyan - the first application to the European Court of Human Rights submitted from Armenia under the review of Article 18 violations (restrictions of the rights by other reasons than prescribed by the Convention).

Azerbaijan

Fikret Huseynli, a Dutch citizen of Azerbaijani origin, became another individual whose rights are violated while he is in danger of being extradited to Azerbaijan. In this alarming development following the case of Afgan Mukhtrali, the Azerbaijani authorities claim that Mr Huseynli has committed fraud

and illegally crossed international borders. This is a test for the commitment of the authorities in Ukraine to the rule of law. If they allow informal groups supported by foreign agents to interfere with their own legal procedures then their credibility will be severely damaged. We urge the authorities to expedite the necessary legal procedures and ensure that Mr Huseynli's rights in the eyes of law, as well as his freedom and safety to be safeguarded.

Belarus

In Belarus, specific indicators are needed to measure the progress in moving forward within the EU-Belarus bilateral agenda, while the independent civil society should have a full and equal participation in the Coordination Group meetings where stocktaking of the interim results of the cooperation should be done. Direct consultations between the civil society and the Foreign Ministry, as well as other line ministries would provide for the necessary follow up between the meetings. Our National Platform in Belarus could have a permanent extended representation (4-5 representatives) to ensure greater expert input to the discussions on thematic issues.

Georgia

In Georgia, democratic institutions have been consolidated and important anti-discrimination and human rights laws have been passed. At the same time, questions persist about the independence of the judiciary. Although major changes have been implemented in the area of transparency of court hearings, judicial independence still remains problematic. Georgia still lacks mechanism for investigating abuses by law enforcement officials. The involvement of Georgian police officers in Afgan Mukhtarli's case has still to be further investigated as addressed in the Steering Committee letter to the Georgian Prime Minister. Georgian media environment has been rated as "partly free" and there are concerns about media pluralism, especially in relation to the Rustavi 2 channel. Our members denounced the alleged violence that led the Georgian citizen Mr Taturashvili to death and urge Russia and the South Ossetian de facto authorities to hand over his body to his family in Tbilisi-administered territory in order to de-escalate tensions, accompanied by the immediate release and peaceful return to their families of Mr Levan Kutashvili and Mr Ioseb Pavliashvili.

The European perspective for Georgia which has existential importance for Georgia. The AA, 2020 deliverables and other frameworks are important instruments which should be efficiently utilized to bring country closer to EU membership.

Moldova

Moldova is lagging behind on the AA/DCFTA implementation with the official delivery rate standing at 66%. The civil society estimates based on a comprehensive monitoring stand even lower. Anti-corruption and justice reforms are still falling short. The media environment continues to be problematic, with further deterioration of media freedom and pluralism. The attacks on civil society have increased. In 2017, the government attempted to impose a new law regulating the civil society sector that would have drastically impacted the reporting obligations of CSO. A joint pressure from the EU and the member states prevented the legislation to materialize. 2018 is electoral year in Moldova and it is a crucial year for its future. The Venice Commission's response to Moldova's electoral law has shaken the belief in democracy in the country, as well as the country's European perspective. Civil society organizations will play a key role in the coming years in halting, and eventually reversing, the gradual rollback of reforms.

Ukraine

The Ukrainian government, in partnership with civil society and the European Union, must work together to ensure the safeguarding of media independence and freedom in the country. This is important both in the occupied areas, where journalists are deprived of access, but in the domestic reform effort - where a strong and free media will help the reform effort and expose corruption at all levels of society. The EaP CSF will play a key role in consolidating and expanding the reform efforts in Ukraine, in the months and years to come, by coordinating and uniting the efforts of civil society, the Ukrainian government and the European Union. In public administration reform, anti-corruption reform, and judicial reform, we are beginning to see real momentum, but we are still far from achieving long-term objectives in this field. CSOs must be supported and participate as equals in policy making processes, as well as provide expertise and guidance when needed most. The EU must strengthen and expand its ties with Ukraine, providing benefits attached to strong conditionality, as it did with visa liberalisation. With a strong partnership and a concerted effort from civil society and the EU, combined with a strong political effort from the Ukrainian government, the establishment of an independent and long-awaited Anti-Corruption courts is within touching distance, which will prove a decisive turning point in the country.

With less than three years ahead of the 2020 landmark, it is our common responsibility to bring to life the ambitious agenda for this challenging region of highest priority to the European Union.

*Delivered by Haykuhi Harutyunyan, member of the EaP CSF Steering Committee-Armenia,
Coordinator of the Working Group I*