

Brussels, 28 November 2016

**Opening Speech by the EaP CSF Steering Committee Co-Chair Ulad Vialichka
at the 8th Annual Assembly of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum**

Dear Commissioner, excellences, Dear participants and guests!

I am glad to have an honor as one of Co-Chairs of the Steering Committee to welcome you at the 8th Annual Assembly of the EaP CSF!

The topic of this year's Assembly is formulated as Building a Common Secure and Democratic Future – we will debate here the progress of reforms in the EaP countries, some outcomes of renewed European Neighborhood Policy, influence of internal situation in the European Union as well as geopolitical developments to the EaP region and civil society in particular. The choice of the topic is also a message to our stakeholders in Brussels, EU member states and EaP countries: democracy, human rights, deep involvement of civil society actors are the means to provide common and secure future and make the reforms sustainable and irreversible.

We met in Brussels for the first time in November 2009. Since then the Eastern Partnership region, European Union policy vis-a-vis the Eastern Partnership, and the Forum itself have changed considerably. 2016 has been an eventful year for the Eastern Partnership countries. Both Ukraine and Georgia have shown much dedication to reforms and to deepening ties with the European Union. The EU-Ukraine Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) entered into provisional application at the beginning of the year, while for Georgia the Association Agreement became fully effective on 1 July. Following the suspension of sanctions against Belarus, the country has demonstrated a greater openness to renewed relations with the West. On the other hand, this year has seen the worst clashes in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces since the 1994 ceasefire, raising the issue of the urgent need for a lasting solution there. Moldova, which also has an Association Agreement with the EU, has just held its first direct presidential election that propelled a candidate, who has said he will scrap the agreement with the EU in favour of joining a Eurasian economic union.

In the European Union migration crisis and Brexit also significantly affected European societies and brought new elements into reality, so now this reality is more cautious and less open towards any developments which take place in the neighborhood, and in EaP region in particular. We can see it on the example of unexpected problems with visa liberalization process for Ukraine and Georgia despite the fact that these countries have fulfilled all the necessary conditions.

The Forum itself has also been changing. Almost a quarter of us at this year's Brussels Assembly are new to the Forum. Almost a half were not present at the 7th Annual Assembly in

Kyiv last year. This indicates a considerable rotation of Forum members and the openness of the Forum, however we should not stop there. We must ensure that the EaP CSF and the National Platforms remain truly open to new motivated organisations and players, as well as draw on the experience of all the organisations, which are or have been involved in the EaP CSF. Only if we attract new members and retain the good will of our membership, past and present, we can resist the threats which CSOs in the Eastern Partnership face from rulers in our countries, many of whom remain suspicious of independent civil society organisations focused on reforms.

The Annual Assembly starts a new cycle of Forum's activities and outlines our aims for the coming year. Let's make the links in Brussels so that we can work together in 2017 to fulfil those aims.

Let me finish my welcome words by wishing all of us fruitful and constructive discussions, fresh ideas and effective solutions for further implementation that will be used in Building a Common Secure and Democratic Future!