

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Statement on the 6th Eastern Partnership Summit, 15 December 2021

Brussels, 16 December 2021

EaP CSF commends the results of the 6th Eastern Partnership Summit and considers it a success. At this critical juncture in the EU's relations with its Eastern neighbours when both sides are facing multiple and complex challenges, the commitment of the EU and EaP leaders to the continuation of the policy sends a strong signal to the citizens of the partner countries and EU member states.

Civil society welcomes the joint commitment of the EU and the EaP countries to recovery, resilience and reform. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and increased security threats, previously existing social, economic and political problems in the EaP region have worsened, with apparent democratic backsliding also in play. As a result, the EaP CSF is concerned that the future EaP policy not only lacks balance between supporting economic recovery and democratic development, but also neglects the involvement of civil society partners that would be willing to further strengthen democracy and the rule of law. We especially consider it a shortcoming that civil society counterparts are not mentioned at all as parties to the process and actors in their own right under the governance, rule of law and security pillar. Civil society is already an actor in this domain, for example in the fight against corruption, but is also directly affected by it, e.g. possible changes in cyber-security regulation. In this sense, a commitment to the principle of conditionality and incentive-based approach of the EU's support in the 6th Summit Declaration sends a positive signal, but the work to be done to improve democracy, human rights and rule of law is on the side of the EaP countries.

Given the worsening human rights situation in Belarus, the EU needs to establish new strategic approaches in order to strengthen Belarusian civil society and pro-democratic political forces as well as to ensure their participation in the Eastern Partnership. For the future of Belarus, four main pillars should be built on to create an enabling environment for democratic forces: 1) further strengthen education and capacity-building opportunities, 2) maintain continuous support and development of free media, 3) foster the effective inclusion of Belarusian democratic forces into EaP implementation, including within the revised EaP architecture, and 4) give continuous support to civil society. The EU should engage with all relevant actors to discuss how to repair the social fabric of the country and support further societal development that can facilitate future democratic transition. At the same time, ongoing pressure on the regime to free all political prisoners, including those who are not officially recognised, should be exercised. The EU should also continue together with other allied countries to systematically sanction the proponents of the regime.

EaP CSF welcomes the acknowledgement of the associated trio of the AA/DCFTA countries and their coordination in the text of the Summit Declaration while upholding the inclusivity and

coherence of the EaP policy. Though the AAs and DCFTAs remain dynamic works in progress, they have already underpinned considerable normative and legal approximation of the three countries - the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine with the EU. Bilateral trade between the EU and the associated trio has grown and high levels of policy convergence between the three states and the EU have transpired, particularly in the spheres of freedom, security and justice and the environment and climate. At the same time, although the associated trio made some improvements in democracy and governance areas according to the 2021 EaP Index, progress was patchy, with inertia and backsliding also apparent. All three countries struggled with the fight against corruption, the independence of their judiciaries and securing the environment for independent media.

EaP CSF welcomes the emphasis on accelerated green recovery and growth, climate policies and green investment underpinned by EU assistance, in line with the European Green Deal, as well as reference to improved environmental governance as a key to achieving green transformation goals. The current climate, green growth, environmental and sustainable development policies, and legislation in the EaP region are either underdeveloped or poorly implemented and enforced. National institutional capacity, knowledge, and resources are not sufficient. EU support is welcomed and will speed up adoption and implementation of necessary environmental, climate, energy, green and just transition reforms. To improve the environmental governance in EaP countries, the EaP CSF has developed a set of specific recommendations for the implementation of the post-Summit agenda that can be found [here](#).

Even if the EaP CSF acknowledges the focus of EaP Summit declaration on the resilient digital transformation, it regrets that digital transformation focuses too much on its infrastructure and not enough on 'soft measures', particularly with regard to education and raising awareness of the benefits, but also pitfalls of digital transformation. This is particularly crucial in the EaP region, which is one of the most vulnerable to hybrid threats.

EaP CSF welcomes that gender mainstreaming is kept in focus both in the Summit Declaration and its Annex I, including through promotion of the Istanbul Convention and producing and disseminating independent, reliable, comparable and gender-sensitive and sex-disaggregated statistics to support partner countries with evidence-based policy-making. EU support should be in line with the EU Gender Action Plan 2021-2025 and should support the EaP countries in meeting the relevant targets of SDG 5 on gender equality. CSOs are playing a vital role in the rights-based gender agenda in the EaP region and their work is the catalyst for reforms namely in the area of elimination of violence against women, domestic violence and addressing gender pay gaps.

EaP CSF welcomes its recognition in the text of the Summit declaration as one of the key stakeholders in the development of the Eastern Partnership. The commitment to create an enabling environment for civil society organisations is appreciated and tackles important issues brought to the forefront by our member organisations in the EaP region. EaP CSF would like to reiterate its recommendations from its [Position Paper](#) on the Joint Staff Working Document on recovery, resilience and reform: post-2020 Eastern Partnership priorities and call for an improved system of accountability that would underpin the new agenda outlined in Annex I of the



Summit Declaration. All relevant stakeholders including EaP CSF should be involved in the inclusive dialogue and decision making process on the implementation of this new action plan.

The EaP CSF and civil society in the region stand ready to contribute to the shaping, implementing and monitoring of the outcomes of the EaP Summit including monitoring the implementation of the reforms in EaP countries via its tools, comprising the [EaP Index](#), so that they deliver for all citizens in the region, leaving no one behind.