

Resolution of the General Assembly of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

15th EaP CSF Annual Assembly

“Cooperation, security and democracy: making a multi-speed Eastern Partnership work”

Brussels, 16 November 2023

We, the General Assembly of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), gathering in recognition of the pivotal role that civil society plays as a guardian of democratic values and reform, convene against a backdrop of a complex and dynamic regional context.

Concerned by the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region's increasingly complicated geopolitical situation characterised by armed conflicts and tensions causing tremendous human suffering and the vital threat posed by a resurgent and revisionist **Russia**, which casts a long and uncertain shadow over our collective aspirations for peace, security, stability, and democracy;

Stressing that **Russia's full scale war against Ukraine** - the largest since the Second World War on the European continent - leading to colossal casualties among Ukrainians, as well as unprecedented destruction of energy facilities, infrastructure and damage to the environment, is part of a wider pattern of aggression towards the region. Russia continues to occupy part of the territory of Georgia, controls part of the territory of the Republic of Moldova in the so-called Transnistria, uses the territory of Belarus for aggression against Ukraine with the consent of Lukashenka's regime, and has been fueling the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan for decades. Most recently, the establishment of a Russian port in Ochamchire, in Georgia's occupied Abkhazia, represents a blatant act of aggression, and poses a serious threat to the entire region, including to the ecosystem of the Black Sea basin.

Mindful of the prolonged **Nagorno-Karabakh** conflict over three decades, which has led to incredible human suffering and profound distress for both parties with the displacement of Azerbaijanis and Armenians in the 90s and Armenians in post-2020; in the light of the urgency of eliminating hate speech and discrimination as a precondition for peaceful coexistence in the region, finding peaceful and lasting solutions to regional disputes with guarantees of respect for territorial integrity, human rights, and safe, voluntary and dignified return of the all the displaced population under the protection of international (United Nations) peacekeepers;

Deeply concerned by the **dramatic deterioration of human rights in Belarus**, where repression against both independent civil society and regular citizens is continuing, including through the

instrumental use of laws on combating extremism and terrorism. The situation in the country remains one of the direst in the region: all opposition political parties have been deprived of legal status during forced re-registration in 2023; about half of the legal civil society organisations were liquidated; more than 1500 men and women are currently recognised as political prisoners; and independent trade unions have been wiped up. add

Very concerned by the **intensified crackdown on civil society organisations in Azerbaijan**, where the government significantly strengthened its repressions and intimidations against local journalists, trade union activists, environmental defenders, opposition figures and prisoners of conscience since the beginning of 2023, leading to the number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan to doubling in the span 12 months, with the number, increasing up to 200 people;

Recalling the opinions issued by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe (CoE) on Azerbaijan's recent Media Law, as well as the Law on Political Parties and the Law on Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), which broadly criticised these legislative measures, underlining that they are in contrast to the binding obligations of Azerbaijan as a member state of the Council of Europe

Recognising the growing threat that the expansion of **authoritarianism** spreading within and beyond the national borders of various EaP countries, which undermines democracy, disrupts democratic transition and values, stifles dissent and civil society, destabilises neighbouring regions, and challenges international norms;

Emphasising the importance of **joint commitment to democratic values** as the baseline for sustainable and effective cooperation and integration between the European Union (EU) and the Eastern Partnership countries.

Acknowledging the **diversity of ambitions** within the EaP region with regard to European integration, with partner countries pursuing different paths towards integration with the European Union, reflecting the unique historical, political, and economic contexts of each nation;

Welcoming the European Commission's recommendation included in the 2023 Enlargement package, to open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and to grant EU candidate status to Georgia; praising the consolidation of Western democratic forces in support of Ukraine;

Welcoming the European Parliament Resolution on EU - Azerbaijan relations as of March 2023, to increase support for and cooperation with civil society and human rights defenders, in particular in relation to restrictions on their work, and to better use of programmes and projects available in the Eastern Partnership framework, particularly those promoting people-to-people contacts between the EU and Azerbaijan;

Welcoming the European Parliament Resolution on the case of Dr Gubad Ibadoglu as of September 2023, to demand his immediate and unconditional release and the release of all other political prisoners and to insist on his immediate access to adequate medical treatment and medication be ensured.

Welcoming of the continuation of the democratic reforms and **European integration process in Armenia**, including the recent ratification of the *Rome Statute* of the International Criminal Court (ICC) marking an important step to bring the country closer to the international community of shared values, as well as launching EU-Armenia Political and Security Dialogue;

Warning about the dangerous short and long term **consequences of the Lukashenka regime's promoted isolation of Belarus** from international cooperation mechanisms, including its withdrawal of the country from the Eastern Partnership and other initiatives and simultaneously, welcoming European partners' increasing recognition of **Belarusian democratic forces** representatives as counterparts and encouraging them to elevate the level of dialogue and collaboration going forward;

Recalling the **shared values and objectives of the Eastern Partnership initiative**, aimed at promoting stability, prosperity, and democracy in the six Eastern European partner countries, as well as the fundamental principles of the European Union; Emphasising the need for the Eastern Partnership initiative to adapt to support the varying ambitions of partner countries, including within the enlargement process;

Stressing the importance of **regional cooperation** within the EaP framework, both between the EU and EaP countries and among EaP countries themselves, including potential inter-EaP cooperation with Western Balkan countries or within the Moldova-Ukraine-Georgia trio to advance shared goals and values and strengthen peace and stability;

Reminding that **civil society is a driving force of the reforms in the Eastern Partnership countries**, plays an essential role as a constant interlocutor, hub for stakeholder communication both inside the countries and across the region, providing a stable, democratic voice in EaP countries, irrespective of government changes, including within the framework of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF);

Deeply concerned about the **growing threats to civil society in various EaP countries**, including the constantly worsening environment for civil society in Azerbaijan, Belarus and most recently in Georgia, where attempts to curtail the independence and influence of civil society organisations threaten the core values of democracy, transparency, pluralism and accountability;

Recognising the need for continuous support for civil society organisations of the EaP countries to strengthen their role in the engagement with governments, improve their coordination and increase of the impact of the public voice in the EaP countries and the region; Reaffirming **our unwavering commitment to the fundamental principles of democracy, peace, human rights and gender equality, the rule of law, environmental security and regional cooperation**, which remain the cornerstone of our shared vision for a stable, prosperous, and just EaP region; stressing our engagement with the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) Strategy 2022-2030.

As delegates to the General Assembly of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum:

Supporting Ukraine and addressing regional crisis

1. We call upon the governments of EU member states and the European Union to **continue providing comprehensive support to Ukraine and dedicate additional efforts to ensure sufficient provision of military aid**. This includes the steady and increased provision of humanitarian and financial aid to the Ukrainian people, but also active efforts to ensure accountability for the crimes committed by Russian authorities and military forces in Ukraine;
2. We call upon the governments of EU member states to **provide gender-sensitive support for the over 4 million Ukrainian refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) and civil society representatives fleeing death from the Russian war**;
3. We recommend to the European Commission to develop an **emergency response mechanism** to ensure fast and effective response to crisis events in the region and be able to involve various parties, including civil society, in the resolution of such conflicts;

Ensuring a strategic approach to Belarus

4. We urge the leadership of the European Union, EU member states, and EaP countries to **provide staunch political support to Belarusian democratic civil society** and to draw a clear distinction between civil society in Belarus and the Lukashenka dictator regime that has suspended the government's participation in the Eastern Partnership. The EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform and the Belarusian democratic forces should continue to be regarded as the interlocutors of democratic Belarus in relations with the EU and remain included in the Eastern Partnership initiative. We also call on you to speed up the formulation of a **EU strategy for Belarus** and a programme of joint actions that aim to halt repression, ensure the release and recovery of Belarusian political prisoners, and support the country's progression towards democratic integrity, formulated in cooperation with Belarusian democratic actors and civil society;

Ensuring comprehensive and efficient cooperation with the Azerbaijani civil society organisations

5. We urge the European Commission and the EU Member States to establish a flexible and effective response mechanism to promptly address the current challenges that local CSOs and CSOs in exile face due to the over restrictive environment in the country; the creation of an Azerbaijan International Implementers Meeting should be considered, along the lines of the already existing and successful experience of the Belarusian International Implementers Meeting (BIIM) and other mechanisms;

Effectively supporting European integration and aspirations

6. We call on the EU, EaP and EU member states governments to ensure the **continuation of the Eastern Partnership initiative**, maintaining its unique flexibility in the bilateral and multilateral track and as well as inclusive formats for civil society interaction, including via the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum;
7. We call on the upcoming European Council to **open accession negotiations** with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, and grant the EU candidate status to Georgia once all steps are completed;
8. We call upon the European Union to intensify its dialogue with the **Armenian government to facilitate further integration** in light of Armenia's explicitly articulated European aspirations.
9. We highly suggest the strengthening of programmes to **facilitate the exchange between civil society organisation from the EU, EaP and Western Balkans**, including through the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum;

Ensuring a coherent foreign policy alignment

10. We urge EU member states and the European Council to **enhance the sanctions regime against Russia** and implement broader measures to counter its attempts to evade both new and existing sanctions. We also call on EaP partner countries' governments to adopt comprehensive sanctions against Russia and take necessary steps to prevent their countries from being used to circumvent these sanctions;
11. We call upon the European Union to dedicate additional efforts to **unblock the regional infrastructures in the EaP**, with a particular focus on the Armenian-Turkish border, thus creating an opportunity for the diversification of economy and reduction of Armenia's economic dependence on Russia;
12. We vividly suggest to the EaP countries and the EU to consolidate efforts to **address Russia's hybrid attacks and combat misinformation and propaganda**, especially with regards to democratisation and European values. European values are the foundation not only of democratic reform but also of successful regional cooperation;

Countering authoritarianism and promoting democratisation

13. We strongly recommend the **prioritisation of actions to counter authoritarian** tendencies among various EaP countries in order to safeguard peace, stability, and democratisation in the region, and urge the European Union to prioritise democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law over short-term interests when engaging with EaP countries' governments, especially in the case of Azerbaijan. Neglecting respect for human rights in favour of short term interests, including energy supplies, can only embolden authoritarian regimes and undermine efforts to promote peace and democracy; Special attention should be paid to supporting democratic practices and the development of the democratic culture of the societies of EaP countries, promoting the development of public dialogue and discussions, deliberative and inclusive practices when discussing democratic reforms and complex social challenges, and supporting broad civic (political) education. This is critical for the prevention of authoritarian tendencies, on the one hand, and various forms of political populism, on the other;
14. We urge the EU member states and European Institutions to call for the release **of all political prisoners in Belarus and Azerbaijan as well as prisoners of war (PoW) across the EaP region**, leverage all available mechanisms to put pressure on the offending governments and stand in solidarity with them and their families; we recommend increasing international pressure to unconditionally release representatives of EaP CSF member organisations Dr Gubad Ibadoghlu, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev and all other political prisoners in Azerbaijan;
15. We call upon European authorities to support the efforts of the Government of the Republic of Moldova to ensure the reintegration of the Transnistrian region, deeply concerned about the violation of human rights, including the right to freedom of movement, freedom of expression;

Supporting civil society and an enabling environment

16. We emphasise the obligation of EaP governments to **uphold the fundamental rights of their citizens**, comply with international standards, and **nurture or create an enabling environment for civil society** at local, national, and regional levels. This involves removing legislative barriers and ensuring the equitable allocation of predictable resources. We urge EU institutions and member states to engage in diplomatic dialogue with the governments of Belarus and Azerbaijan, pressing for immediate actions to safeguard civil society, uphold democratic principles, enact necessary legislative changes, and promote an environment conducive to the registration, operation, funding, and functioning of civil society organisations. Additionally, we call on EU institutions and member states to support the sustained operation of civil society actors in all EaP countries, including those forced to operate in exile, by providing consistent and reliable funding;

17. We recommend accelerating the engagement of EaP countries in Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) - the new flagship funding programme for civil society support as permitted in Article 24 of EU Regulation 2021/692 to boost democratisation and regional cooperation.
18. We urge the EU member states to increase financial and institutional support to the CSOs of Azerbaijan, making it adequate to the pressing needs in the country, similarly to the support provided to the Belarusian CSOs operating in exile; and re-activate the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights Country-based Support Scheme;

Providing adequate assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)

19. We call upon the governments of EU member states to **provide support for refugees forced to leave Belarus for political reasons** in the swift legalisation of their stay, their social integration, and the prevention of discrimination;
20. We remind EU member states also the importance of facilitating the **relocation of EaP citizens at risk of political persecution**, including civil society representatives, through visa support, job opportunities, and educational opportunities;
21. We also call upon the EU, EU member states and the donor community to **provide the necessary assistance to Armenian refugees, with a particular focus on the needs of conflict-affected women and girls**, supporting their living conditions, as well as social, educational, health, labour needs;

Cross-cutting priorities

22. We urge EaP governments to strengthen measures to tackle **gender-based violence**: women, particularly from ethnic minorities, continue to die as a result of atrocious crimes. We call upon the EaP governments to adopt effective legislative measures to ensure ratification and compliance with the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention and other international standards and to prevent all forms of violence against women and girls and/or domestic violence, to protect and ensure the inalienable right of women and girls to live a life free from violence; We call on to the European Institutions to increase investment in projects aimed at improving women's political participation and economic empowerment;
23. We encourage EaP governments to further explore recent trends in **SME digitalisation** and actively support digital and green transformation. The emphasis should be on developing a shared understanding of the transformative potential of digitalisation, nurturing appropriate SME skills for digital transformation, and facilitating the digital transformation of SMEs. This includes providing female entrepreneurs with opportunities to actively participate in e-commerce;
24. We suggest the European Union, Eastern Partnership and EU member states' governments to consider the creation of a working group on **environmental security** for the EaP work plan for

2024, given its importance as an instrument for ensuring human rights, effective implementation of the European Green Deal and the sustainable economic transformation of the EaP countries and Ukraine's reconstruction;

25. We strongly advocate for all involved parties to actively support educational programs and initiatives that focus on enhancing **digital literacy**. These efforts should comprehensively cover areas like **media literacy, critical thinking, and digital security**, thus equipping citizens with the necessary tools to effectively identify, navigate, and counter misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda. Such a holistic educational approach is vital not only for understanding the socio-political dynamics within and across national borders but also for fostering a well-informed and digitally savvy citizenry.
26. We encourage the expansion of initiatives that foster **connections between youth, senior citizens, educational bodies, and cultural institutions** to enhance solidarity and collaboration across the EaP countries;
27. We recommend the EU to bolster **support for education and mobility programmes** with the EaP countries, recognising the pivotal role of learning and interconnectivity in advancing democratic reforms and societal development; we urge EU member states to facilitate active networking opportunities for students, academics, and professionals, thereby strengthening the fabric of democratic engagement across the region;