



## **Written contribution of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum for a video-teleconference meeting of EU and EaP Ministers of Foreign Affairs (27+6 format) to take place on 11 June 2020**

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum welcomes the meeting of EU and EaP Ministers of Foreign Affairs in the online format to continue dialogue on important issues regarding the future of the EaP policy. We recognise the solidarity the EU has shown to the partner countries from the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. We welcome the discussions on how to mitigate its impact in the long run and how to use the challenges and vulnerabilities uncovered to work together on more democratic and just societies.

The Eastern Partnership has been devised as a policy based on values that its participant countries have committed to. These values include human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights. The adherence to these values by the authorities of the EaP countries is not a given after more than 10 years of the existence of the policy. The EaP political elites are not delivering on those commitments, even though some patchy progress has been observed in several EaP countries. In fact, when you think about the EaP it is anything but the geographic space where human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights are respected. Building value- and rule-based societies is a long and in fact never-ending process. However, there needs to be clarity about the obligations that should be respected if the Eastern Partnership is indeed a true partnership based on common values.

The post-2020 Eastern Partnership should establish both the ambitious goals that the EaP countries will strive to achieve with the support of the EU, but also the requirements with regards to the respect of the fundamental rights and freedoms that should serve as a precondition for any support to non-compliant governments. The link between stepping on clearly identified red lines and cutting the EU support should become stronger. A practice of transferring EU funding from noncompliant governments to civil society and other reform-oriented actors should be established. The societies already suffering from undemocratic regimes should not be cut from the EU moral and financial support, but the accountability of the EaP governments for its actions should be made stronger.

The lack of progress in the areas of democratic governance, rule of law, fight against corruption as well as support and promotion of independent media and enabling environment for civil society has been identified as a major deficiency of the EaP policy. For the post-2020 framework, incorporating different elements of democratic governance into a bigger number of priority areas is crucial. Bearing in mind the central role the primacy of economic development plays in the new approach outlined by the EU and the high interest of all EaP governments in economic cooperation, the risks stemming from bad governance and mismanagement will run even higher in the upcoming years. To mitigate the risks, the EaP beyond 2020 must be modelled around a renewed and strengthened cooperation between the EU and democratically-minded constituencies in the region, in particular civil society. The long-term engagement of the actors beyond the governments benefits the policy implementation and leads to more sustainable results. Moreover, the EU should use the economic pillar of the post-2020 EaP as a smart tool to leverage the progress in the domain of freedoms, rights and enabling environment for civil society.



While keeping its regional focus, the EU should tailor the targets within each new deliverable to individual EaP countries. There is a widespread call to have country specific roadmaps within the new EaP roadmap, where each country will have its own commitments and targets. Such a tailored approach should not serve as a pretext or enabling pattern for any cherry-picking from the EaP policy goals and principles. The implementation of the targets should be split among multiple country actors including civil society. The role and participation of the European Parliament and the EU member states should be strengthened via improved access and effective control over programming of the new financial instrument for the EU neighbourhood and EaP and its enhanced monitoring. EU member states that declare the EaP as their political priority should step up their efforts in engaging in the EaP multilateral framework implementation.

The civil society organisations, informal initiatives and citizen's groups are at the frontline in responding to COVID-19 crisis and have demonstrated again their remarkable societal value, expertise, solidarity and resilience in the situations of the absent or delayed governmental response, encroachments on the fundamental freedoms, and lack of capacity and funds. They have once again illustrated the importance of the support provided to them by the EU and other stakeholders and their readiness to mobilise and deliver in crisis situations of various kinds.

They are delivering in spite of the worsening environment for operation for civil society in several EaP countries. Since the start of COVID-19 crisis, the environment has considerably worsened in Azerbaijan and Belarus and, to some extent, in Moldova: the pressure from the authorities on dissenting voices has increased in Azerbaijan and Belarus with soaring numbers of cases of politically-motivated arrests and intimidation; unfavourable legislation has been adopted - as the Presidential Decree on Foreign Aid in Belarus - or the legislation that would improve the civil society situation has been stalled - as the draft law on non-commercial organisations in Moldova. The opportunities for meaningful participation in public consultations by the broader population and civil society have plummeted in all EaP countries. In the COVID-19 crisis the consultations are often becoming tick-the-box exercises. New ways need to be found to ensure the outreach, meaningful participation and safety of the population while conducting the consultations.

Public oversight mechanisms should become an integral part of all types of funding provided by the EU to ensure that funding benefits the broader society and is spent effectively. Public oversight and accountability for the received financial support is becoming even more important now, when increased amounts are channelled to the EaP governments for mitigating the effects of COVID-19 and emergency situation mechanisms introduced in the EaP countries give more space for misappropriations and improper use of funds. Moreover, public oversight of the provided support will help increase the EU visibility as the major donor in the region.

The EU is by far the largest donor tending to the imminent mitigation of the COVID-19 crisis in the EaP countries, providing a direct support amounting to EUR 13,2 per capita to the whole region<sup>1</sup>. The mobilisation of EU resources and the response has been swift and flexible. The

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<sup>1</sup> <https://eap-csf.eu/campaigns/prepare-eap-for-health-covid-response/> The US comes second with 0.24 EUR per capita.



EU should use this credit and plan for smart socio-economic recovery turning the COVID-19 challenge to the long-term advantage together with the EaP citizens and societies.

The economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis is likely to push many countries into recession. The economic structure of the EaP region is already fragile, and with the restrictive measures adopted to tackle the spread of the virus limiting the activities of the business sector, the risk of economic disruption is high. The collapse of oil prices directly affecting Azerbaijan and Belarus, and consequently the whole region, is going to further aggravate the effect of the crisis. The EU should assist the EaP governments with drafting comprehensive long-term recovery plans tailored to country-specific situations. The civil society has pointed out no such plans exist at the moment in many EaP countries. Supporting a fair business environment free of nepotism, increasing competition and investing in sectors with a potential for development, growth and competitiveness on the EU market remain a priority.

The resilience building of the EaP societies in the post-crisis era has to focus systematically on the most vulnerable groups. The EU should continue working with the EaP governments, civil society and business to address the major vulnerabilities revealed by the current crisis and ensure social security and protection of jobs, access to quality health services, resilient public health system capable of managing crises, education system that ensures access to (online) education to all, and food security. It is similarly important to build societies based on trust, non-discrimination and solidarity including with fellow citizens in difficult life situations (serving prison terms, undergoing psychiatric treatment, etc.), the societies that protect its vulnerable.

The EU should keep focusing on support to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). The prevalent majority of small and medium-sized enterprises in the EaP do not have operating assets and can stay afloat in conditions of reduced demand only for several months. The EU could initiate a short term bridge fund for SMEs in difficult situations due to COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, support creation of new SMEs through long-term loans and non-repayable grants, following the examples of measures and programmes introduced in Armenia or Ukraine. The EU should launch a comprehensive programme for the digital transformation of SMEs, focusing on online training seminars on business development through digitalisation, including e-commerce and e-sales.

The economic recovery should be linked to green growth and sustainable consumption of resources. This agenda should not be pushed into the background due to new priorities. At the same time, green transformation is at a very early stage in the region, driven rather by the EU reform agenda, environmental CSOs and minority segments of the population rather than by genuine demand from the majority of EaP citizens and/or governments. Post-COVID recovery is a window of opportunity to design a reform set to improve people's quality of life, for example in the area of waste management and many others. The EU should keep supporting environmental awareness that would precede major reform steps, treat the citizens as a target group of comprehensive communication activities first, using the support and work of the civil society.

One of the key priorities for socio-economic recovery should be to secure the viability of the civil society sector in mid and long run. In many policy areas, the civil society is pushing for



the agenda that is changing the societies, educating and sensitising the citizens towards issues like domestic violence, discrimination at workplace or environmental standards. These priorities and organisations that are working on delivering long term change should not be abandoned due to reorientation of the donors' priorities. In the same vein, the independent and small local media have been experiencing one of the most challenging periods of their existence. It is important to support their sustainability so that they can effectively deliver on their societal function.

To improve the outreach and communication in post-COVID era, the youth-centred approach should be paired with a targeted approach for other groups and age groups that benefited from the EU response to the health crisis to ensure that the messages are widely channelled. There should be outreach to non-English speaking segments of society through campaigns informing citizens about various aspects of the post-COVID recovery and funding. The messages should be built on a narrative of solidarity supported by specific examples.

The EU should keep its consistent attention on the Eastern Partnership even in the time of pandemic and closely monitor the situation denouncing violations or backtracking. Even at times when travel to the countries is not possible and the EU presence in the countries is reduced, it is important to find ways to monitor such key processes as elections: the electoral campaign is going on with egregious violations in Belarus and elections will happen later in the year in Georgia and Moldova. The capacity of the EU Delegations should be increased with more staff locally who will not only oversee the situation with rights and freedoms, lead design and implementation of the recovery projects, but will continuously look for opportunities to increase the presence and visibility of the EU on the ground.

Under the new challenges posed by COVID-19, civil society has been mobilising, innovating and reinventing the links with its target groups, supporters, and citizens. We are experiencing an unprecedented wave of solidarity and high levels of engagement coming from the citizens that will hopefully lay a new foundation for more pro-active, just and trust-based societies. We are looking for new and flexible ways to have effective policy dialogue and for turning the current challenges into opportunities and working together with all stakeholders interested in democratic, fair and resilient Eastern Partnership countries.

### **More Information**

*The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) is unique multi-layered regional civil society platform aimed at promoting European integration, facilitating reforms and democratic transformations in the six Eastern Partnership countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Serving as the civil society and people-to-people dimension of the Eastern Partnership, the EaP CSF strives to strengthen civil society in the region, boost pluralism in public discourse and policy making by promoting participatory democracy and fundamental freedoms. The EaP CSF is a non-partisan bona fide non-governmental organisation. For more information, please visit the EaP CSF website at [www.eap-csf.eu](http://www.eap-csf.eu)*