



## **Eastern Partnership Senior Official Meeting**

**Speech by Tania Marocchi**

**Director, EaP CSF Secretariat**

Brussels, 14 March 2024

Dear representatives of EU institutions and member states,

Dear EaP partners,

Dear colleagues,

I am happy to speak to you today on behalf of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and share our perspective on how to advance regional cooperation under the EaP policy.

2024 marks 15 years since the launch of the Eastern Partnership initiative: a symbolic anniversary to trigger important reflections ahead of the Summit next year.

What we wish for the region is clear: democracy, stability, prosperity and most of all, peace. As we always advocate, civil society is a key actor in progressing towards these goals. And it bears repeating that EU Institutions, Member states' and EaP countries' governments and institutions are both partners and gatekeepers of civil society in this path.

The past year has seen ups and downs in the region's reform process and patchy or problematic civil society involvement as well at times. To ensure sustainable reforms, we need increased civil society engagement in decision-making processes. This is particularly crucial for the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, in the context of which we would like to see civil society's involvement with the Ukraine Facility and the Ukraine Plan, as well as, going forward, in the enlargement process.

This is relevant for Moldova as well of course, but also crucial for Georgia, where we have been appalled to see government representatives actively starting smear campaigns against civil society representatives or draft laws – later withdrawn – that would have stifled independent voices. This is unacceptable and we call on Georgian institutions to ensure the wide and comprehensive involvement of civil society in the recently formed working groups and in any relevant discussions.

We have seen Armenian authorities articulating more clearly the country's European aspirations and look forward to them and European institutions delivering on those expectations. We have also seen Azerbaijani civil society facing deeper and further challenges and are extremely concerned about the state of the third sector 10 years since the infamous 2014 law. We call urgently on a coordinated approach to support Azerbaijani civil society.

Last but not least, a point on Belarus, the only EaP country not represented in this room but of whose civil society we channel the voice.

We welcome the Council Conclusions on Belarus of February this year reaffirming the EU's continue to support Belarusian civil society and recognising its European choice and acknowledging it as an important partner in the framework of the Eastern Partnership. Therefore, we of course welcome the dedicated attention to the continued involvement of Belarusian civil society representatives in EaP meetings and have a few suggestions how to support Belarusian civil society further.

Belarusian civil society is currently undergoing what we could call a stabilisation phase. As you know, many civil society organisations have relocated and reoriented their work abroad. Some of the grassroots initiatives that emerged from the socio-political mobilisation of 2020 transformed and began to institutionalise leading to the emergence of new actors. This testifies to the dynamism and adaptability of Belarusian civil society under changing conditions. Although it is not possible to have a clear picture, this statement is valid for civil society inside Belarus. Many activists remain active within the country but conceal their activities for security reasons, rendering them invisible to the outside world and maybe giving the impression that nothing is happening within Belarus itself. This is not the case: both activity – and repression – are still ongoing and civil society should continue to be considered a key actor of change inside and outside the country, and a key player in the wider democratisation of the region.

This makes it all the more crucial to provide Belarusian civil society with steady, stable, predictable and coordinated international support to be able to transition fully from being in survival mode to a phase of active promotion of systemic changes.

In this respect, priority should be given to supporting initiatives that aim at building the resilience and capacity of Belarusian civil society, particularly in the areas of organisational development, advocacy, transparency, and security in repressive conditions.

When it comes to focus themes, human rights, gender equality, youth empowerment, civic education, digital literacy, and ecological sustainability should be integrated in all support to Belarusian civil society and their integration and strengthening in EaP multilateral meetings and workplan can only benefit them as well.

And speaking of the workplan – we have a few comments for your consideration.

Starting from the experience of the 2023 workplan:

- We welcome the creation of the gender working group, in which we actively participated and look forward to the continuation of its activities. The group started a practice of joint follow-up among participants, which we found very valuable and recommend continuing and replicating in other contexts.
- On the other hand, as formal civil society representatives in the EaP multilateral architecture, we saw that the practice of steady and regular involvement of civil society in all EaP architecture meetings was somewhat discontinued. We urge you all to ensure that EaP CSF representatives are regularly invited to meetings in 2024 and to be the champions of civil society involvement.

Moving on to the 2024 workplan, we are happy to see the continued inclusion of human security and a strong focus on digital transformation. On the latter, we strongly encourage all parties here to use EaP channels to share best practices and actively support educational programmes and initiatives that focus on enhancing digital literacy. These efforts should be comprehensive, and cover areas like media literacy, critical thinking, and digital security, to equip citizens with the necessary tools to effectively identify, navigate, and counter misinformation and disinformation, but also to foster a well-informed and digitally savvy citizenry – a key pre-condition for democratisation.

We also have two additional suggestions for your consideration:

The first is to include a **working group on environmental security**. Ensuring environmental security is not just about protecting nature but also about safeguarding human health and promoting economic prosperity. This is key to the effective implementation of the European Green Deal and the sustainable economic transformation of the EaP countries and Ukraine's reconstruction, so a key area for stronger regional cooperation.

The second suggestion is to create a **working group on civic space**, addressing questions related to civil society's meaningful participation in decision making, access to funding, and the regulatory environment and legal frameworks for a thriving civic space. The sharing of best practices and challenges in this area can be an excellent way to simultaneously raise the bar on civic engagement and support democratic reform at the same time.

Lastly, we have a very practical but meaningful recommendation to improve and maximise the transparency and accountability of this and other meetings – and it is to simply but crucially making minutes of meetings available as a standard practice, sending summary notes, and inviting corrections after the meetings. The relatively simple act of sharing the main conclusions and recommendations of the discussion systematically with all attendees, including with EaP CSF civil society representatives, and make them open for comments, would ensure:

- First, *continuity*, because new representatives at meetings could more easily catch up easily on previous work and duplication or scattered conclusions would be avoided. This is particularly relevant given the more shared ownership of the Annual Workplan.
- Second, *transparency*, because the expert community of stakeholders could follow the works even if not physically present at the meetings;
- Third, *accountability*, because it would allow parties to check that their input is properly reflected, integrated and followed up in the work ahead.

I will stop here. Thank you very much for your attention. I wish you a productive continuation of the meeting and traditionally I remain optimistic that civil society will be a full participant in the next Senior Officials Meeting.