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13 May 2019

Speech by Zaur Akbar, Steering Committee Member and Working Group 4 Coordinator of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum at the Eastern Partnership Ministerial Meeting (Foreign Affairs) in Brussels

Over ten years, the EaP has yielded a number of results. All partner countries have progressed in many areas, although on different trajectories that have not been always linear. The EaP is not merely six individual neighbouring countries with different regimes and relations with the EU anymore. It has become a region in itself, with tighter economic, political and personal connections. The policy has also delivered some results for the populations, especially in the area of people-to-people contacts with visa free regimes in place with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia – with significant increase of students studying in the EU via Erasmus+, youth exchanges and systematic work with young entrepreneurs. Trade has been growing significantly, namely thanks to the three Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. There is significant headway on access to finance and support to SMEs, connectivity and transport, digital agenda and public administration reform. The recently concluded Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Armenia is another milestone. Many results of the current efforts will still show in the near future. The role of civil society in the formulation, implementation and assessment of the EaP policy has grown significantly.

The successes of the EaP, however, need to be evaluated against the backdrop of patchy rule of law reforms, insufficient respect of human rights, widespread corruption and weak environmental protection and climate change mitigation. Consistency is needed when implementing reforms of judiciary, tackling corruption and money-laundering, discriminatory practices or facilitating good working environment for media and civil society. Rule of law is the foundation of stable reforms in all areas: without it, any progress is reversible, any investment can potentially be lost.

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. Such cooperation can be effective if the civil society is allowed space to operate, and if it is considered as a fully fledged partner. At the moment, the 20 Deliverables for 2020, which include civil society as a cross-cutting deliverable, miss the larger issue of civil society's operating space, and its position in relation to the EU and EaP governments.

In the upcoming period, the partnership has to be shaped as a two-way street – where spheres of cooperation that are of interest to both sides, the EU and EaP, should be identified. The experience from EaP countries, and its civil society, has become increasingly relevant for the EU member states and can be shared with mutual benefit to both sides. Short-term, mid-term and long-term policy goals should be spelled out and explained to EaP citizens to create ownership over the reforms. To stimulate reform, the new policy should be built as a set of transformational tools available to different actors – not only the governments, but also civil

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society, business or local authorities so that the motivated actors within society are strengthened.

The complex EaP agenda makes it difficult to keep the focus on singular issues. In order to underline the importance of specific topics, each year of EaP implementation could be dedicated to a specific priority issue. The initiative could start with an EaP Year of Environment and Climate change due to the urgency to act – and turn these topics into a priority for the whole roadmap cycle. More on that can be found in the EaP CSF policy paper, dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the EaP.

Moving on to country-specific observations, we welcome the recent release of political prisoners in my country, **Azerbaijan**. At the same time, we urge the government to release all political prisoners who are behind the bars. Carrying fundamental reforms in three main directions: ensuring independence of judiciary; unbiased and objective law enforcement and investigative bodies; free and fair elections can help to improve the situation. We are glad that the negotiations on the comprehensive partnership agreement have advanced – at the same time, deeper economic and trade cooperation has to be based on solid rule of law and access to justice for everyone.

In **Armenia**, a consistent strategy of promoting European values and counteracting anti-European disinformation, targeting wider audience needs to be urgently implemented. The commitment of the new government to implement reforms needs to be backed by stronger interaction with the civil society, as the democratic transformation is facing a strong resistance from the circles both inside, and outside the country, investing heavily to hamper the changes. We also call for the formation and development of a clear mission for the CEPA Civil Society Platform, taking into account the concerns of the EaP CSF Armenian National Platform.

The civil society welcomes its invitation into dialogues with the **Belarusian** authorities and the EU – including the EU-Belarus coordination group meeting or EU-Belarus Dialogue on Human Rights. At the same time, the exchange with the authorities, without EU assistance and involvement, remains a challenge. Free and fair parliamentary elections and the environment allowing civil society, independent media and human rights activists to operate freely should be the pre-condition for further development of the relations between Belarus and the EU. The EU-Belarus visa facilitation agreement needs to be signed promptly – to decrease the effect of the pervasive disinformation about the EU.

In **Georgia** the civil society enjoys a good level of cooperation with all branches of power. In terms of reforms, judicial reform should be prioritised and sped up. It is important that the Supreme Court judges nomination process is transparent, and in line with international standards, as well as the recommendations of the Venice Commission.

After the general elections, held with the use of manipulation and administrative resources, **Moldova** has not yet formed a majority coalition and the new government. If local elections are held together with Parliamentary elections in autumn, it is expected that the use of administrative resources, intimidation and manipulation of public opinion will take place. No results of the investigation on the banking fraud, and window-dressing of anti-corruption efforts, lead to a high disillusionment of the population and intense outflow of people. Today,

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as never before, it is crucial to support civil society, independent mass media, local public authorities and small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) – especially in the regions of Moldova, to make the Association Agreement (AA) implementation a success. It is important to monitor the implementation and ensure proper communication to the citizens.

In **Ukraine**, the civil society is in constant dialogue and cooperation with public authorities. The presidential elections were conducted in line with Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) standards, even in the times of Russian aggression. It is important to maintain the high standards for the upcoming parliamentary elections. With the new President-elect, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, a continuity in pushing the European reforms forward is expected. The progress in this domain should not fall victim to political competition. The established institutional and legal framework of EU-Ukraine cooperation needs to be preserved and strengthened in areas where reforms pace is slow. It is important for the European partners to pay close attention to the security environment and challenges Ukraine and other partner countries face, in particular countering hybrid threats stemming from Russia.

To conclude, there are specific challenges in the region that require tailored responses and tailored funding – namely already-mentioned mitigation of hybrid threats, security cooperation, support and facilitation of the access of the EaP countries products and services to the EU single market or harmonisation of digital markets and cross-border services. All these elements should continue to be catered to by a specific funding instrument. In the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) should be re-established on the basis of the existing ENI regulation and further improved. The role of civil society in programming, monitoring and evaluating the new funding instrument should be enhanced and correspond to the growing engagement of civil society in the policy-making cycle at the EaP multilateral and bilateral level.

Thank you for your attention.