



Adopted by the Conference of the Belarusian National Platform  
of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum  
24 February 2018

## RESOLUTION

of the Conference of the Belarusian National Platform  
of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

### **The Civil Society of Belarus as a Stakeholder of Belarus-EU Relations: Towards Deliverables 2020**

We, the participants of the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, which brings together over 70 civil society organizations of our country, express our deep interest in the pro-active participation of Belarus in the processes, programs and activities of the Eastern Partnership, as well as in the development of equal and sustainable relations between Belarus and the European Union on the principles of parity, regional and national security, the rule of law, democracy and respect to human rights, market economy. In particular, we:

#### **In relation to the current status of Belarus-EU relations and the prospects of the Eastern Partnership:**

- Share and support the main provisions of the Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit (24 November 2017, Brussels), and in particular the part relating to the current status of Belarus-EU relations, which states that the parties "appreciate that the EU's critical engagement with Belarus has become more comprehensive, including within the EU-Belarus Coordination Group, the Human Rights Dialogue and the Dialogue on Trade".
- Welcome the general rapprochement between Belarus and the EU, the expansion of cooperation formats and areas of cross-sectoral cooperation. Believe it is necessary to effectively complete the process of agreeing on Partnership Priorities between the Republic of Belarus and the European Union in the near future and make these agreements available to the public.
- Assess as definitely positive the efforts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, as reflected in the Presidential Decree of the Republic of Belarus No. 8 "About establishment of visa-free procedure for entrance and departure of foreign citizens" introducing a five-day visa-free procedure when entering through Minsk National Airport for citizens of 80 countries. We also expect that the visa-free procedure for visitors of our country that proved its objectively positive results will be soon extended to apply to all border-crossing points and prolonged in terms of the duration.
- Assess positively some steps of the Belarusian authorities and the EU towards greater openness in contacts with civil society. The meetings of the EU-Belarus Coordination Group and the Human

Rights Dialogue in 2017 took place with the partial participation of Belarusian civil society representatives. In addition, an important step in the search for mutual understanding was the participation of representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus at the Annual Assembly and EaP Civil Society Forum (Tallinn, October 2017), for the first time since the inception of the Eastern Partnership initiative.

- Note, nonetheless, along with these positive examples, the unpredictability and limited nature of these interactions and would welcome more proactive steps in developing and improving the efficiency of the existing formats, and the interactions between representatives of state structures and civil society organizations in Belarus.

#### **In relation to the current social, political and economic situation in Belarus:**

- Welcome the Inter-Agency Plan on Human Rights for 2016–2019, adopted by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, which aims at comprehensive improvement of the situation with human rights in Belarus. Likewise, the ratification of the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and the adoption of National Plans on Gender Equality, on the Rights of People with Disabilities and Children create opportunities for improving conditions for specific groups of the Belarusian society. Welcome the progress made in respecting the rights of families and children, particularly in addressing issues of removal of children from the family. However, express our concern over the lack of necessary changes in legislation, the processes of implementation of these plans that are far from acceptable dynamics, there are still serious problems in the human rights field in Belarus: the death penalty is kept; national legislation and law enforcement practices restrict the basic civil and political rights; there are no effective mechanisms of human rights protection, including a special national human rights institution; there are no effective mechanisms of dialogue and considering the views of civil society at national and local levels.
- Express the unacceptability of facts of regular pressure on independent media and journalists. Support the assessment of the situation with the freedom of speech in our country, presented in the last statements of the Belarusian Association of Journalists and a group of human rights organizations on the inadmissibility of access restriction to the websites "The Belarusian partisan" ([belaruspartisan.org](http://belaruspartisan.org)) and the "Charter 97" ([charter97.org](http://charter97.org)) and call to cancel the corresponding decisions of the Ministry of Information and restore free access to these sites. Also encourage to review the existing legislation on Media and stop the practice of political censorship on the Internet, as well as the prosecution of journalists for conducting their professional activities.
- Welcome the return of previously collected funds of citizens according to the Presidential Decree No. 3 "On prevention of social dependency" of April 2, 2015, as these steps and decisions contradicted the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus and created social tension in the country. Regret that with the signing of Decree No. 1 "On employment assistance" the authorities continues the attempts of coercing Belarusian citizens to work, contrary to constitutional norms.
- Consider the adoption of the Decrees No. 7 "On entrepreneurship development" of 23 November 2017 and No. 8 "On the development of the digital economy" of 21 December 2017, as important steps to improve the business climate, develop small and medium enterprises, internationalize the economy and create better conditions for strengthening and competitiveness of high-tech enterprises of our country.
- Forced to admit the absence of any positive changes in the electoral legislation and practice of conducting electoral campaigns in Belarus in the aftermath of Local Councils elections of the twenty-eighth convocation of the Republic of Belarus on 18 February 2018. Agree with the conclusions of the election monitoring campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" that

the local council elections did not meet a number of key international standards for democratic and free elections.

- Note, despite some positive examples of cooperation between NGOs and Belarusian authorities on specific issues and projects, in general, the significant lack of progress in creating favorable environment for activities of civil society organizations. Belarus still maintains criminal liability for acting on behalf of unregistered organizations, there is a licensing system for registration of public associations and foundations, the law restricts the access of non-profit organizations to domestic and foreign funding, non-profit organizations come across obstacles in exercising their rights on freedom of speech, assembly and information.
- Welcome the return to Belarus, after the expiry of the three-year politically motivated expulsion, of our colleague, human rights defender, Chairperson of the Board of the Legal Transformation Centre (Lawtrend), Mrs Alena Tankachova. None of the three petitions submitted by Mrs Alena Tankachova for shortening the period of her expulsion have been satisfied, despite all the possibilities. The mere fact of her return in any way cannot be regarded as a sign of improving the situation with human rights in our country.
- Welcome the steps of the government of Belarus to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular the Parliamentary hearing on SDGs in the Council of the Republic, the adoption of the National Strategy of Sustainable Socio-Economic Development 2030 and the built up "national architecture" for the SDGs achievement, as well as recently held in Minsk "Regional forum of national coordinators on SDGs": building partnerships in support of national efforts for sustainable development". However, we are deeply concerned by the lack of information about the synchronized work on the SDGs between the government agencies and civil society organizations active in the regions. Would welcome a more open character of interactions of the regional groups, led by members of the Council for Sustainable Development — Vice-chairperson of Regional Executive Committees and Minsk city Executive Committee with civil society organizations of Belarus for enhancing the efficiency of the SDGs strategy.
- Based on the above-mentioned aspects of the overall situation in Belarus and the current status of Belarus-EU relations, we call on the representatives of the Belarusian authorities, EU institutions, EU member states, and various non-governmental stakeholders from Belarus and EU countries:

**In the framework of achieving separate objectives in different sectors:**

- In connection with the adoption by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus of Inter-Agency Plan on Human Rights for 2016–2019, as well as the ratification by Belarus of the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and the adoption of the National Plan, to ensure timely and quality implementation of these agreements in close cooperation with civil society organizations and other stakeholders in accordance with the designated criteria.
- In connection with the approval of the National Action Plan for Gender Equality in the Republic of Belarus for 2017-2020, to ensure the development of gender approach implementation mechanisms in the process of development and implementation of public policies in different spheres, as one of the Eastern Partnership cross-cutting 2020 priorities and deliverables.
- Urge, in the view of the high importance of Belarus' accession to the European Charter of Local Self-Government, to adopt the Concept of Local Self-Government Development in the Republic of Belarus and to develop a Program for its implementation, based on the principles and norms of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, in particular: decentralization of power, respect to the principle of subsidiarity; fiscal decentralization; establishment of the National Association of Local Councils; the concept of "community" to be enshrined in the legislation; de-bureaucratization of

citizens participation in the local self-government development; openness and transparency of the activities of local authorities, etc.). We also call upon the government of the Republic of Belarus to consider the possibility of accession to the global initiative Open Government Partnership, which has already involved the vast majority of the EU member states and all other EaP countries. We expect the Government of Belarus, in cooperation with civil society organizations, to participate in the development and implementation of the OGP National Action Plan, through the institutionalization of a mechanism for regular dialogue and cooperation between the government and civil society.

- Taking into account legislative and regulatory steps made to improve business environment, we invite the government of Belarus to involve private sector actors as partners in the implementation of the needed reforms, economic development and regional cooperation strategies. We also consider it appropriate to stimulate the development of mechanisms for systematic public-private dialogue (PPD) in plain language for small and medium-sized businesses, on a regular basis, focusing on specific topics and adequate timing.
- In connection with development of digital economy and market as a modern high-tech stage of development and the need to increase the level of digitalization and harmonization with EU markets, draw attention of the government of the Republic of Belarus and non-state stakeholders to the priority importance of the participation in creating the Digital Single Market together with the EU and other EaP countries by 2020 (and the future 2030+) as one of the main priorities. For a better understanding of the relationship between citizens, civil society organizations, business and government, as well as their possible changes and development in the future (particularly in relation to citizen participation, decision-making, digital and open government, digital single market etc.), there is a need to identify drivers of change and create favorable conditions for them.
- In order to best guarantee the constitutional right of citizens to a favorable environment and implementation of international obligations of the Republic of Belarus derived from the conventions and other documents in the field of environment and climate change, we need to develop and support the tripartite dialogue, one side of which should be represented by consolidated civil society actors who are active in a systemic way in this field. In the area of Belarus-EU cooperation a wider dialogue with the civil society of Belarus is possible on the development, monitoring and evaluation of programs in the field of environment, greater transparency of the expenditure of funds, including those allocated by the EU, and decisions made.
- In connection with the lack of progress in the implementation of obligations on the implementation of the Roadmap for the Higher Education Reform by the Belarusian side, we call upon the government in order to ensure its implementation to develop and implement during 2018-2020 an Inter-Agency Action Plan for full and comprehensive implementation of the Roadmap including the requirements of state guarantees for fundamental academic values and the rights of students and teachers stated in the Council of Europe recommendations Rec/CM(2012)7. We urge EHEA member countries, the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the European University Association, the European Students' Union, Education International, and other European organizations to support the recommendation of the BFUG Advisory group (AG2) to keep the special procedure for Belarus to support efforts over full implementation of the Roadmap by 2020.
- In connection with the consideration of the issue of enabling environment for activities of civil society organizations as one of EaP cross-cutting 2020 priorities, we propose to the government of the Republic of Belarus, as the first steps to improve the situation in the field of general conditions for civil society activities, to introduce a simplified procedure for registration of organizations by analogy with the registration of commercial organizations. Also, relevant steps in this field are the

abolition of article 193.1 of the Criminal code and changes in the procedures of receiving and using foreign aid.

- Considering that the right to freedom of peaceful assembly is enshrined in article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which was signed and ratified by the Republic of Belarus, the national legislation of the Republic of Belarus, however, does not provide fully for the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, as evidenced by the Opinion of the Venice Commission, as well as by numerous decisions on individual complaints of citizens of the Republic of Belarus to the UN Human Rights Committee, we deem necessary the adoption of amendments to the national legislation of the Republic of Belarus to ensure the right to freedom of peaceful assembly.
- In connection with the increase in the total life expectancy of the citizens of Belarus, the dramatic changes taking place in the pension system of the country, as well as the latest trends connected with Belarus' accession to international instruments we offer the relevant public authorities to consider the signing the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002).

**To improve the existing formats of coordination of EU-Belarus cooperation, we offer:**

- To move from formulating wide topics for each meeting of the EU-Belarus Coordination Group and the Human Rights Dialogue to the permanent agenda with the ability to track the progress in the discussions or in the adoption and execution of decisions.
- To formulate at least as a frame document a EU-Belarus Roadmap with specific indicators which can help to measure progress in moving forward within the defined agenda.
- To increase the participation time of independent civil society organizations to full and equal participation.
- To organize direct (non-public) consultations of civil society organizations (primarily members of the Belarusian National EaP CSF Platform) with the Foreign Ministry and other relevant ministries on the agenda of the Coordination Group between the meetings.
- To introduce the practice of preliminary drafting and dissemination of the recommendations, cooperation plans and other documents for prior review (both from the government and from civil society) to be discussed at the meeting.
- Meetings of the EU-Belarus Coordination Group and Dialogue on Human Rights need not only to start the next half-year cycle of communication but also have the opportunity to take stock and to fix the achieved interim results of cooperation between Belarus and the EU.
- The Belarusian National Platform as a permanent institutional member of this platform could have a permanently extended representation (4-5 representatives) to ensure greater expert input to the discussions on thematic issues.

The Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and its member organizations are ready for the most active involvement and shared participation in the above-mentioned processes, collaboration with national and international institutions.

Minsk, 24 February 2018

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