

24 September 2018

**Speech by Hennadiy Maksak Steering Committee Member and Ukraine Country  
Facilitator of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum at 8<sup>th</sup> CORLEAP Annual  
Meeting – Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership**

On behalf of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), I would like to thank you for your invitation to participate in the 8th Annual Meeting of the Conference. This provides me with a great opportunity to exchange some observations on the developments in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and its region.

The upcoming 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership initiative will no doubt provide many opportunities to discuss result and achievements, as well as challenges ahead. Halfway way in reaching the milestone year 2020 – “20 deliverables for 2020”, with the EaP roadmap in mind, adopted at the last EaP Summit in December 2017, civil society perceives the Eastern Partnership policy and underlying principles of rule of law, democracy and human rights as relevant as ever.

There are good results in the area of economic development, trade and market opportunities, as well as in connectivity, energy efficiency, environment or people-to-people contacts. At the same time, EaP should be further enhanced to tackle the challenges of state capture, corruption and money-laundering – the security challenge and the challenge of disinformation. This would require more ambitious approaches and greater engagement of citizens and that is where civil society needs to step up its efforts, especially in the regions outside of EaP capitals.

While observing that the EaP has turned into a policy that is conducted mainly by the European Commission, and become slightly more technical in nature – civil society would like to see more presence and political weight provided by the EU member states, who are interested in the security of EU borders and having stable neighbours. At the same time, stability cannot be achieved without effective, and first of all, democratic institutions that are fully accountable and open to citizens. But we are more concerned by the current trend driven by some of the EU member states who are advocating for the neutrality as a preferred conceptual solution for the EaP region. We have witnessed that neutrality has not worked for Moldova and would not work Ukraine, my home country.

The EU decision-makers also often underestimate the changes in the EaP region, such as the revolution in Armenia. If there is no improvement in the relationship with the EU after a country makes an important step towards a more democratic system – then it might send confusing

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signals for other EaP states, which would see fewer incentives to follow the same path. At the same time, we have seen the EU institutions and member states react promptly to the worsening situation in Moldova – where all EU financial support was suspended until the upcoming elections in January 2019. This is a very positive step but the EU should think of new and more complex approach towards backsliding countries, as financial consequences are neither a carrot nor a stick big enough to improve the situation in Moldova in such short-term perspective.

The future of EU financial assistance to EaP countries is discussed within the big debate on the next EU budget for 2021-2027. The proposal to combine current 12 EU external action instruments under one roof – the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), sends a strong signal to the EaP partner countries and societies that they are not a special category of partners who are helping to secure EU's vital interests. The EU is running a risk of losing credibility as driver of the complex reform agenda. At least three countries from the EaP region have a perspective of association with the Schengen Area and integration into EU Customs Union, EU Energy Union and EU Single Digital Market on the course of the next MFF, and some of the EU member states have already acknowledged a long-term perspective of the EU membership.

Now briefly on individual countries.

### **Armenia**

Civic activism, and civil society at large, played a crucial role in the revolution in Armenia that opened the doors to hope – that the ongoing reform process will not only lead to a better future for the Armenians but also could provide a model of peaceful change and reform for other EaP countries. In the aftermath of ‘Velvet Revolution’, the new Armenian government has to tackle a complex changes – while inheriting old institutions and policies defined by narrow interests of oligarchic groups. We see that the civil society is serving as a source of experts for the new government. We are happy many of our colleagues took over important roles, contributing with their knowledge and principled approach to the development of the country. Some decided to serve in Nikol Pashinyan's government. At the same time, we have to bear in mind the major role of the civil society is to hold the government accountable. The EU should support the efforts of Armenian government, especially in the areas relevant to the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) implementation and review, together with new Armenian officials, its implementation roadmap that was prepared by the previous regime. Reforming the electoral code and organising the parliamentary elections is a crucial precondition to forming a legitimate government, one that can fully operate based on parliamentary democracy, the basis of democratic culture. Until the elections, the situation remains fragile and we are fully supporting our Armenian colleagues in the Forum and beyond during these challenging, but ultimately, hopeful times. We also supported our numerous

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colleagues who were running in the local election to the Yerevan City Council on September 23.

## **Belarus**

There are positive trends in field of the building cooperation between the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and Belarusian authorities. At the invitation of the Belarusian authorities, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe held a round table and several high-level meetings with the Belarusian authorities in Minsk in September 2018.

Among positive developments in people-to-people contacts in Belarus, one should mention an one month visa-free regime that allows to improve contact between people, but as well cooperation with the EU and EaP countries.

Worth mentioning, Belarusian NGOs had held the Eastern Partnership Summer school in Minsk, where civic leaders from the EaP countries shared their experiences and gained new skills.

At the same time, in August we saw numerous arrests and detentions of Belarusian journalists and representatives of news agencies – which were disproportionate to the level of their supposed wrongdoings, raising a lot of criticism from the EU institutions and human rights’ watchdogs.

## **Moldova**

The assessment of my civil society colleagues in Moldova is that the country is making very little progress in implementing the EU-Moldova Association Agreement – Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (AA/DCFTA). After the unprecedented suspension of EU bilateral macro-financial assistance, due to Supreme Court of Moldova’s decision to invalidate the Chisinau mayoral elections for no good reason – which was widely perceived as abuse of judicial power, the EU-Moldova relations are at critical moment.

The lack of political will in the side of Moldovan authorities to solve the crisis can very well lead to putting the whole implementation process in question. Civil society is under pressure and its environment has to operate in a space that is gradually shrinking. The EU adopted wait-and-see attitude until the upcoming elections in January 2019. Arguably, the elections are not likely to produce change, as the state is effectively “captured” and divided by two oligarchic groups.

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For the Republic of Moldova, 2019 parliamentary and local elections will be a real test for politicians and citizens. The way reforms will be organised, and implemented, will depend on citizen's expectations of what they should entail.

Firstly, the implementation of the AA – then implementation of the main document packages in the field of decentralisation, namely the territorial-administrative reform.

## **Ukraine**

I have no doubts that Ukrainian representatives of CORLEAP will share the positive experience Ukraine has reached in implementing public administration reform and decentralisation. Living in Cherviv, I am witnessing the positive changes my city has undergone over the course of recent years – with my own eyes.

Nevertheless, in a war-affected state, some regions demand more attention and support from our European partners. In this context, there might be an interesting initiative, which was proposed by Ukrainian authorities – for those of you present here: reconstruct our cities near the frontline by establishing direct contacts with municipalities from the EU states.

Against the backdrop of positive reforms, Ukrainian authorities have to accelerate the finalisation of Anti-corruption and Judicial reforms, where there are still many unresolved issues. It directly affects the development on regional and local level.

At the same time, we observe a worrying trend where civil society activists are still in the risk group in Ukraine. Only in last two months, we had assaults on civic and anti-corruption activists with serious damage to their health, in the Kherson and Odessa oblasts. We call on regional and local authorities to pay more attention to the civil society environment and ensure investigations of these cases that took place in the relevant constituencies.

## **Cooperation between the EaP CSF and CORLEAP**

In March 2018, we saw the official start of the renovated multilateral architecture of the Eastern Partnership, where there is a special role for both CSF and CORLEAP. The relaunch of multilateral track provides a good opportunity to think about deepening cooperation between our institutions.

As you rightly mention in your draft report on “Economic cooperation and economic development at local level in the Eastern Partnership countries”, the main objective should be to gain the ability to create new formats of cooperation between local authorities, SMEs and NGOs. And not only on local level.

EaP CSF has been looking for its own specific place in relations with the European institutions and national governments in partner states. Previously the potential of the EaP CSF and its

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presence on the ground in the EaP countries has not been fully utilised. This will be addressed by the EaP CSF internal reform process. We possess an expert database, with expertise on a broad number of issues – which has been drawn up with the 20 Deliverables in mind, embedded and prioritised in EaP CSF strategy.

I would also like to draw your attention to our annual publication “EaP Index”, which provides comprehensive data on partner country targets and their implementation in the run-up to 2020, again in the context of 2020 Deliverables. This comparative research project will no doubt generate interest in those drafting CORLEAP reports.

As a first step in this direction, we would like to propose signing a memorandum between EaP CSF and CORLEAP, particularly in the areas where joint efforts may be applied. We have to focus on the base of 20 Deliverables: support trade among partner countries, which also includes the EU, creation of new job opportunities at the local and regional level, better engagement with civil society organisations. But among those priorities, there should also find coordinated action in countering Russian propaganda and disinformation. There should be no illusion: the further you are from Russia, the better you are prepared it resist it.

In this regard, we are very much looking forward to the discussions of the youth workshop on misinformation – during the session on engaging young citizens and dealing with misinformation.

### **Appeal to Regional and Local Authorities of the EU and EaP partner countries**

We would like to express our serious concerns on the attempted return of the Russian Delegation to Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), in contradiction to principles of Council of Europe and the Assembly’s resolutions. The Steering Committee of the EaP CSF adopted an official appeal to the Delegations of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on this matter.

Moreover, this attempt to bring Russia back to table has been done under the intention to modify rules of the Assembly for its better functioning. This is despite the Russian Delegation not being mentioned in the draft report for rule-changing. It is fully in line with the Russian policy of blackmailing the Council of Europe, who froze its obligatory financial contributions.

This is a very dangerous situation – where there is a choice between money and values, money prevails. If rules will be changed on Russian demand, the Assembly future sanctions will be seriously complicated. It could make an environment of impunity for member states, breaching the main principles Council of Europe is based on. It could undermine the whole body’s confidence and harm its credibility, affecting all decisions approved in the future.

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If you meet the parliamentarians who represent your state in the PACE, please make sure they are really aware of the gravity of this issue and potential repercussions.

In line with this concern, there are cases where regional authorities in some EU states play into the hands of Kremlin by adopting very dubious and externally initiated statements of regional councils about lifting sanctions affecting Russia. The crucial point should be: no lifting of sanctions, at least without requests for concessions from Kremlin's side.

More campaigns on raising awareness should be held – for the members of regional and local authorities in the EU, and some EaP partner states. It should be made clear that visiting occupied territories is in breach of national legislation of partner-countries. Not only does this send a wrong signal to the society, it might also bring about criminal charges against respective persons.

Let me conclude by saying that Civil Society Forum fully supports the activity of the CORLEAP.

I wish you a successful work during this 8th session of the Conference and a pleasant stay in Ukraine.