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**Speech by Ina Coseru, Steering Committee Member and Working Group 3 Coordinator of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum delivered at the Eastern Partnership Senior Official Meeting**

On behalf of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, I would like to thank you for the invitation to this meeting. We will soon be celebrating the 10th anniversary of the EaP policy. This occasion prompts an honest assessment of the past and exchange on ambitious ideas for future. We are preparing for this, and I now will share with you several ideas on behalf of civil society.

Despite different level of ambitions and intensity of bilateral relations of the EaP countries with the EU, **EaP policy is relevant and brings added value** – some countries benefit more and some less, however, no country should be left behind. At the same time, we believe a **change of mind-set is necessary** to move ahead. The last ten years have been mostly about one-way thinking. There needs to be more reciprocity and acknowledgement that people from both sides are benefiting from the partnership. The new agenda after 2020 **working for the benefit of the whole societies**, rather than the elites only, can give the multilateral policy a new boost with a more nuanced approach and more regional content. Security, interconnectivity, infrastructure, energy security and climate change are some of the multifaceted challenges that require multilateral solutions.

Democracy and rule of law should be nurtured internally within the EaP countries and should stay at the heart of the policy beyond 2020; As recent developments in my home country Moldova show, **the reform efforts can collapse without the rule of law**. EaP policy should focus further on effective implementation of the judiciary reform, fight against corruption and money laundering, respect for human rights, fair media environment and truly enabling the space for civil society. These are the cornerstones on which the EaP should be built and which should guide all the political and financial decisions.

We positively assess that to strengthen the rule of law and good governance, the EaP countries will be institutionalising specialised anti-corruption bodies and mechanisms of incomes and assets declarations. Nevertheless, we should not forget that corrupt money from EaP is deposited in the EU banks. Multiple undeclared properties of corrupt officials from EaP lie on the territory of EU, therefore to ensure the EU security and help us fight corruption and improve governance EU could take the lead in verifying the legality of these money and property.

The current EaP roadmap – **20 Deliverables for 2020**, though being a unique regional monitoring tool pioneered for EaP, can be more ambitious and incorporate the instruments that will ensure the delivery of the targets and will decrease the opportunities for avoiding the most painful and needed reforms in good governance, anti-corruption and the rule of law that are a necessary foundation for the reforms in other sectors. When formulating new targets, we should focus on assessing quality of implementation and measurable impact, not creating a

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checklist of stand-alone results. Furthermore, in order to improve the new roadmap, the targets, implementers and audience of the deliverables should be better defined; the decision-making, implementation process and evaluation should be inclusive and participatory, involving civil society and other important actors within societies beyond the governments.

The EaP governments should be more open to dialogue with their societies. We have already several positive examples. The government of Ukraine is sharing and discussing its own evaluation of the 20 Deliverables for 2020 with the civil society and the civil society input is reflected already at this stage. Our independent and comprehensive monitoring is an important tool in the assessment of the deliverables and we will continue with this work.

Out of the three cross-cutting deliverables, I would like to focus on support to civil society. I will not talk about funding, although our concerns over the new EU funding instrument, NDICI and how fit it is to fund effectively the civil society in the EU neighbourhood and political signal that such a unification of the funding would send to our countries, persist. I will not talk about problems impeding our work, be it legislative or administrative harassment in many EaP countries, especially during the pre-election periods. I do not want to talk about more access to the whole policy-making cycle and high-level bilateral meetings where civil society should have a voice. I want to talk about the political support that **should be given by the EU to the civil society, as a key actor in the reform process, in a robust and explicit way whenever the foul play in the countries is identified.**

This is also an effective way to reach the citizens hearts. The EU has applied conditionality in Moldova and was outspoken in supporting the harassed CSOs and made it clear it is there to support the reforms for the benefit of citizens. The credibility of the EU and its image has significantly improved among the Moldovan population.

The Parliamentary elections held in February this year in Moldova were carried out not in a democratic way, if only to mention more than 37.000 people from Transdnier region, who were brought by organised transport and paid to vote for a certain party. There is a need to monitor closely the upcoming local elections, in order to give a chance for the democracy in Moldova and see the real will of the Moldovan population. Manipulation, disinformation and using the administrative resources during elections is unacceptable. Proper communication of EU reforms to the citizens and securing independent media should also stay at the basis of building a democratic state in Moldova.

Unprecedented number of political prisoners was released in Azerbaijan, we welcome this step of the government but at the same time we believe all political prisoners should be freed. The legal framework for the civil society has not improved, the grants cannot be registered and CSO leaders are persecuted on various grounds. We are glad the negotiations on the deep and comprehensive partnership agreement have advanced, at the same time, the deeper economic and trade cooperation has to be based on solid rule of law and access to justice for everybody.

In Armenia, a consistent strategy of promoting European values and counteracting anti-European disinformation targeting wider audience need to be urgently implemented. The dedication of the new government to implement reforms is faced with a strong resistance of the circles both inside and outside Armenia investing big money to hamper the reforms. We

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also call for the speedy formation and development of a clear mission for CEPA civil society platform in Armenia.

The civil society welcomes its inclusion into various dialogues with the Belarusian authorities, including the EU-Belarus coordination group meeting or EU-BY Dialogue on Human Rights, at the same time the exchange with the authorities without EU assistance and involvement remains a challenge. I would also like to turn your attention to the fresh case from April 9, when the premises of Belsat satellite TV channel in Minsk were searched as part of the criminal case on account of dissemination of defamatory information. The civil society has repeatedly called for decriminalisation of defamation that often serves as a pretext to investigate and prosecute independent media.

In Georgia, the civil society enjoys a very 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 and the recommendations of the Venice Commission.

In Ukraine, civil society continues to benefit from active dialogue and good cooperation with public authorities, at the same time, recent decriminalisation of the illicit enrichment in Ukraine casts shadows on anti-corruption reforms track. It is important for the European partners to keep close attention to the security environment and challenges Ukraine and other partner-countries face, especially when it comes to countering hybrid threats stemming from Russia. It is not a coincidence that at the time of presidential elections in Ukraine Russia unfolded another wave of the crackdown of Crimea Tatars in the occupied Crimea, a traditional disgraceful practice of exerting violence against Ukrainian citizens.

2019, the year of EP election and re-staffing of EU top jobs, is important for the EaP future and we hope that the EaP will not be marginalised due to these changes. We are glad many EU member states have already stepped up and voiced their support and vision for the policy. We are looking forward to hearing more support from leading politicians from both EU and EaP countries.

As an organisation, we are contributing with our share by our 10 years anniversary campaign and we are ready to offer more specific ideas and input for your debates about the future of the policy. We are preparing a policy paper on EaP for after 2020 based on a comprehensive input from our members. The paper will be ready for our main anniversary event on May 14, organised back to back with the official high-level event and kindly hosted by the Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU. We cordially invite you to attend this event and exchange with us in an interactive and open format of the debate.

Thank you for your attention.