

4 December 2019

Statement by the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on the occasion of the 11th EaP CSF Annual Assembly on the safeguard of the civil rights in Belarus and the inclusion of civil society in the planning of deeper integration of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation

Since the end of 2018, the authorities of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation have been negotiating the deeper integration, which can jeopardize the sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus and the respect for civil rights. The meeting of the presidents of Belarus and Russia is scheduled for 8 December 2019. A set of new integration documents is going to be signed at the meeting.

The process of deepening the integration of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation is of great concern to the civil society of Belarus and other partner countries due to the lack of transparency and access of citizens to credible and unbiased information. All negotiations on deeper integration are held behind closed door and public access to the documents is restricted; the documents are classified as “for internal use”. Furthermore, there is lack of inclusiveness and control - no civil society organisations, local communities, private business owners, or trade unions of Belarus are included in the process of negotiations. Per definition, the parties to the intergovernmental negotiations on the deeper integration are not equal, as there is asymmetric relation of dependency between Belarus and Russia.

The negotiations take place against the formation of the new parliament of the Republic of Belarus (The National Assembly) in November 2019, resulting from the elections that did not comply with the international standards for democracy, freedom and transparency of the electoral process defined by the international missions (ODIHR OSCE) and national independent missions (“Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections”). There are considerable restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of association and freedom of expression, including the Internet. The practice of politically motivated administrative arrests and criminal proceedings with the purpose to pursue civil society activists still takes place in Belarus.

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum:

- calls upon the authorities of the Republic of Belarus to adopt changes in the Belarusian electoral legislation in line with recommendations of OSCE ODIHR and Belarusian human rights organisations; to adopt changes in the legislation on peaceful assembly taking into account the OSCE guidelines on the freedom of peaceful assembly; to adopt changes in the registration of public associations applying the registration principle, to reverse administrative liability for the activities of unregistered public associations, to stop the pressure on freelance journalists and independent media representatives, to stop politically motivated administrative and criminal proceedings of social activists, and to rehabilitate former political prisoners;
- calls upon the authorities of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus to ensure transparency and inclusiveness of the deeper integration negotiations and to take into account the views of the Russian and Belarusian citizens on this issue;

- points out that the ongoing process of deepening the integration with Russia bears the mark of forcing Belarus to relinquish its sovereignty while using the tools of economic blackmail;
- calls upon the EU representatives and individual EU member states to consider that due to lack of inclusiveness and transparency of the process and due to lack of democratic representation mechanisms and respect for human rights in Belarus, the decisions of the authorities do not reflect the opinion of civil society and the citizens of Belarus on deeper integration with Russia;
- emphasizes that under the current circumstances, no integration agreements should be recognised as legitimate by the international community;

We call upon the EU institutions, EU member states governments, EaP governments and civil society organizations to support the sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus. We call on them to raise their voices in support of respect for human rights, as well as for the amendments to the election procedures in accordance with the international standards on the occasion of the meeting of the EU-Belarus Coordination Group and EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue, and in multilateral meetings of the Eastern Partnership.

Members of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum