

**Foreign Ministerial Meeting**  
**Speech by Tania Marocchi, Director, EaP CSF Secretariat**  
**Brussels, 11 December 2023**

Dear High Representative/Vice President Borrell,

Dear Commissioner Várhelyi,

Distinguished Ministers of Foreign Affairs, representatives of EU institutions and member states,

Dear EaP partners,

I am honoured to speak to you today on behalf of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

In the next few days, European leaders will have an historical decision to make in the European Council: deciding on whether to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. We call on your governments to take this historical decision. To do the right thing and open the accession negotiations as soon as possible next year.

To tell the citizens of Ukraine and Moldova that Europe is waiting for them to be a part of the family of peace, prosperity and solidarity. To tell the citizens in Georgia, Armenia, but also Belarus and Azerbaijan, that this is an option for them too. To send this important political and historic message and to strengthen the credibility of the process. And what is more, to follow up to this decision with solid support to EaP countries, who have difficult reforms ahead of them.

Of course, partner countries are in the lead and reform is essential. I look at you, Foreign Ministers of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia: your countries have done a lot so far. Our own assessment via the EaP Index 2023 edition confirms this. But more needs to be done. Rule of law and judicial reform, fight against corruption must remain the top priority of your agendas. Make sure that your governments work on a constant basis with civil society. Reforms must be shared, participatory and inclusive.

This evening, you will discuss **how the Eastern Partnership can continue to meet the needs and priorities of the EU and partner countries.**

**From our perspective, there is no doubt that the Eastern Partnership policy should continue:** The policy is an anchor to European values and EaP countries have so many common

challenges that require common solutions. The work on their EU accession is complementary and overlapping. The inclusive formats for civil society interaction included in the policy continue to provide a crucial opportunity for cooperation.

This past year, the revised work-plan has succeeded in providing flexible formats of exchange. **Going forward, we would like to see more continuity and follow up between meetings to make sure that the results of those productive discussions are not lost.**

Besides this, we would like to see a strengthening of the **partnership** element of the policy.

Russia's ongoing war of aggression towards Ukraine is a daily reminder that this is a war that we will all win or lose together. On these grounds, providing financial, humanitarian and military support to Ukraine must remain everybody's number one priority. Acting as a partners is a key goal.

But we need more than this: we urge EU member states to **significantly strengthen the sanctions regime against Russia** and implement credible measures to counter its attempts to circumvent the sanctions. **I also look at EaP partner countries representatives in the room:** adopt comprehensive sanctions against Russia as well and make sure that your countries are not used to circumvent them.

**Second, we call on you to use the tools within the policy to develop a regional approach to democratisation, rule of law and human rights.** The goal must remain clear: to safeguard and advance the principles of peace, stability, and democratisation. **Europe cannot be prosperous and sustainable if the region is in turmoil.** For this, we need to prioritise actions that counter authoritarian tendencies across the region.

**A specific and critical focus should be directed towards supporting initiatives that foster democratic practices and cultivate a democratic culture within EaP societies at large.** Democracy is hard work, every day, constant work. We can never be complacent. The goalpost is forever moving. So, it is essential that we - governments and civil society representatives together - champion the development of public dialogue and discussions. That you support the embracing of inclusive practices when formulating democratic reforms. That you work in partnership with civil society, enabling our work. As civil society, we are your partners in

this, we need to work together to prevent and fight authoritarian tendencies and combat the dangers of political populism.

As they advance on the path towards the EU, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia will undergo difficult, sometimes painful reforms, which may test the strength of their democratic institutions and governments. This is no less valid for Armenia, who is articulating more clearly its European aspirations and faces similar challenges. We need to act in a preventative way, think three-steps ahead and follow suit with our actions, promoting civic, political education among citizens with renewed efforts. In Belarus and Azerbaijan, we cannot stop defending democratic values and human rights, and to do this, we need your dedicated support. Let me elaborate.

### **On Belarus.**

We have in this room an empty chair for Belarus. We welcome your meeting with Belarusian democratic forces on the margins of today's and previous meetings. We have been advocating for this since 2020 and welcome the launch of a Consultative group on Belarus. This is a good step. But we should and can do more.

We encourage you all, representatives of EU Member states, EaP countries governments and EU institutions, to **engage more boldly, publicly with Belarusian democratic forces and civil society representatives**. Integrate Belarusian democratic forces into the Eastern Partnership framework.

In parallel, continue to publicly condemn Lukashenka's actions. His regime is guilty of many abuses and brutality, including complicity in the abduction and transfer of Ukrainian children and other civilians. We must not allow his crimes to go unnoticed and unpunished.

### **The situation of human rights in Belarus continues to deteriorate dramatically.**

Repression against both independent civil society and regular citizens is continuing as we speak. All opposition political parties have been deprived of legal status during the forced re-registration in 2023; about half of the registered civil society organisations were liquidated; Independent trade unions have been wiped up. More than 1500 men and women are currently recognised as political prisoners; their children left without parents; their families held hostage.

On these grounds, we call on you to speed up the formulation of a long-term **EU strategy for Belarus** based on updated Council Conclusions. We need a programme of joint actions to halt



repression and ensure the release and recovery of Belarusian political prisoners, and that in parallel supports the country's progression towards democratic integrity.

Not least important, Belarusian civil society continues to need your solidarity, support, protection, and legal ways to register and work in the EU. It doesn't need further confinement or isolation, so we urge you to adopt the necessary measures to ensure that they can exist and thrive, including via support to the New Belarus passport initiative.

Lastly, on Azerbaijan.

This year we witnessed an intensification of the **crackdown on civil society organisations in Azerbaijan**. Repression and intimidation against local journalists, trade union activists, environmental defenders, and opposition figures has ramped up. The number of political prisoners has doubled in the span of 12 months. 200 people are currently held in jail on politically motivated grounds. Gubad Ibadoghlu, a renowned political economist, prominent opposition figure and a founding member of our organisation, has been held in prison since July this year on politically motivated charges. His life is now hanging by a thread as life-saving medications have been denied to him.

We said it last year and I repeat it here today: going forward, the EU and all its member states should avoid compromising on rule of law and human rights in light of the renewed EU-Azerbaijan cooperation on energy. **Human rights are not for sale and cannot be purchased in cubic metres of gas or barrels of oil.**

When you travel to Azerbaijan, make it a point to meet with civil society first; seek ways to establish a flexible and effective response mechanism to support civil society organisations. The creation of an Azerbaijan International Implementers Meeting, along the lines of the already existing and successful Belarusian experience is one of the options that we suggest you consider.

Since my time is up, I will stop here, but I remain fully available to discuss these matters further.

Thank you very much for your attention. I wish you a productive continuation of the meeting.