

## Senior Officials meeting

### Speech by Irina Sukhy, Co-chair of the EaP CSF Steering Committee

Brussels, 15 November 2023

Dear colleagues,

Dear EU institutions and member states representatives,

Dear EaP partners,

I am honoured to speak on behalf of the Eastern Partnerships Civil Society Forum and share with you our observations and recommendations on the future of the EaP policy.

The civil society from the EaP region has been facing tremendous challenges in recent years.

**First, most obvious, the full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine started in February 2022.** This led to immense suffering, colossal casualties among Ukrainians, as well as unprecedented destruction of energy facilities, infrastructure and damage to the environment.

**Second, the Lukashenka dictatorship with continuous repression** and levelling of human rights on the one hand, total interference of the Russian Federation in the internal affairs of the country, on the other, Thousands of activists from civil society, journalists and regular citizens imprisoned, which caused the largest part of civil society activists and pro-democratic forces to continue their fight for democracy from exile.

**Third, most recently, the return of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh.** The prolonged conflict over three decades led to incredible human suffering and profound distress for both parties with the displacement of Azerbaijanis and Armenians in the 90s and the Armenians in post-2020. The urgency is to eliminate hate speech and discrimination as a precondition for peaceful coexistence in the region, finding peaceful and lasting solutions to regional disputes with guarantees of respect for territorial integrity, human rights, and safe, voluntary and dignified return of the displaced population to Nagorno-Karabakh under the protection of international peacemakers.



**For all our problems there is a common denominator: the resurgent and revisionist Russia.** Russia's full-scale aggression in Ukraine now is just the later stage of a war begun in 2014. Russia continues to occupy part of the territory of Georgia, controls part of Moldova (so-called Transnistria), and actually controls all of Belarus together with the Lukashenka regime. Russia has been fuelling the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan for decades. The threat is not only for EaP, but also for the EU, pressured by migration of huge numbers of refugees and Russia's hybrid war on energy and disinformation.

With this in mind, **the Eastern partnership policy remains a crucial framework to continue promoting cooperation among EaP countries, support their democratisation processes and fight authoritarianism.**

Civil society in the EaP region needs your support, which is in the benefit of the EU as well.

We thank our European partners for the EC's adoption of the 2023 Enlargement Package, recommending to open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and to grant candidate status to Georgia. We call on you to support both the bilateral agenda of EU accession of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, **but also keep the EaP as a whole in focus:** security, stability and democracy are vital not only to the EaP, but in the broader interests of the European family at large. **Security cooperation should be a more prominent component of the Eastern Partnership policy regional cooperation, as well as support to democratisation efforts outside the now enlargement duo/trio.** We call on you, European partners and friends to our region, to support us in the fight against **resurgent authoritarianism** in our region. We urge the European Union to prioritise democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law over short-term interests when engaging with EaP countries' governments, especially in the case of Azerbaijan and Belarus. Neglecting respect for human rights in favour of short term interests, including energy supplies (such as from Azerbaijan), can only embolden authoritarian regimes and undermine efforts to promote peace and democracy elsewhere too.

We thank our European partners for the **staunch political support to Belarusian democratic civil society.** We appreciated the systematic involvement of Belarusian civil society in EaP architecture meetings, with dedicated slots for civil society representatives over the past year. We thank you for drawing a clear distinction between civil society in Belarus and the



Lukashenka dictator regime, which has suspended the government's participation in the Eastern Partnership and encourage you to continue stressing this as clearly as possible. We thank you that the EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform and the Belarusian democratic forces, via their Coordination Council, Joint Transitional Cabinet and Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, are regarded as the interlocutors of democratic Belarus in relations with the EU and remain included in the Eastern Partnership initiative. This must be continued. **While being aware of the complexity around this, we urge you to consider for your high officials to sit in public formats with representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces, to strengthen their voice and and stand by their values.**

We also call on you to speed up the formulation of a **EU strategy for Belarus** and a programme of joint actions that aim to halt repression, ensure the release and recovery of Belarusian political prisoners, and support the country's progression towards democratic integrity , formulated in cooperation with Belarusian democratic actors and civil society.

As crises continue to unfold for both the EaP and the EU, we call on the European Commission to develop an **emergency response mechanism** to ensure fast and effective response to crisis events in the region and be able to involve various parties, including civil society, in the resolution of such conflicts.

To conclude, for the continuation of the EaP multilateral cooperation, we would like to see a stronger focus on security, democratisation, and insistence on shared values as the fundamental basis of this partnership.

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