



**Euronest Parliamentary Assembly**  
**Remarks by Ana Otilia Nutu**  
**Steering Committee Member of the**  
**Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum**

Brussels, 20 March 2024

Dear Members of the European Parliament,

Dear members of the EaP countries' parliaments,

Dear Sviatlana Tskikhanouskaya,

Distinguished representatives of EU institutions and member states,

I am honoured to address you today on behalf of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, on how we view the future of the EaP region and our role as civil society.

We are now at a critical political juncture: European elections are coming up in June and it's almost time to take stock of what was done - **almost**. There are still a few months left before wrapping up this mandate.

EU leaders will assemble again for the Summit here in Brussels tomorrow for important decisions. They should not shy away from discussing enlargement and adopt as soon as possible the relevant negotiating framework. We call on you: **ask for this to take place now**. Do not push the decision after the elections, when we don't know what the new political constellation may be.

There is an expectation among some that Poland, which will take over the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU in 2025 and has announced it will host the EaP Summit, will start to lay the groundwork for enlargement. But time is of the essence. We ask you to sustain this political momentum and call onto the European Council to advance swiftly on the adoption of negotiating frameworks.



**Beyond this immediate matter, we call on you to continue working closely on the EU approximation and democratic reform processes across the entire EaP region.**

**Enlargement and neighbourhood are complementary to each other - and not in competition. Since 2009, the EaP policy has been and continues to be a training ground for the EaP countries with EU aspirations.**

. It was precisely the EaP policy, with its flexible approach adapted to each country's needs, which kicked off the reforms on democracy, rule of law, and functioning market economy that allow us to hope today for EU accession for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. It was the achievement of the European Neighbourhood Policy that the three countries signed Association Agreements, including DCFTAs since 2014. And it is precisely the EaP framework that supports today Armenia's renewed ambition and political will to build a stronger partnership with the EU, beyond the existing CEPA. Both the civil society and the Armenian government desire closer ties with the EU: it is now high time to fully commit to the hard, frustrating yet rewarding work, in both Yerevan and Brussels, to make it happen. The EaP thus supports, not undermines, the European aspirations of individual countries.

**But EaP is not only for countries who plan to join the EU sooner or later.** It is for all the countries in the region where the citizens, sometimes despite repression from their governments, have aspirations and values matching those of the EU: respect for freedom, equality before the law, the final say in governing their country and politicians who understand they are there to serve the public, and not the other way around. For these countries, EaP policy is sometimes the only instrument to empower civil society. It is a crucial safeguard for activists in Belarus and Azerbaijan.

**These people need now more than ever supporters in the EU to hear their voice, and EaP gives them the platform and hope for change.** In Belarus, repression against independent civil society and regular citizens continues. All opposition political parties have been deprived of legal status during the forced re-registration; virtually all independent civil society lives in exile or is behind bars; independent trade unions have been wiped out. More than 1500 men and women are currently recognised as political prisoners; their children left without parents; their families held hostage. We do welcome the updated Conclusion of the Council from 19 February and we appreciate the ongoing support of the EU for Belarusian civil society and democratic forces. But we must do more. It's time to have a comprehensive, coherent **EU strategy for Belarus**. A clear plan of joint actions to stop repression; release political prisoners; and support the country's progression to democracy. On this, the EaP CSF can work with you.



**We are alarmed by the ongoing repression of civil society and media in Azerbaijan.** Since 2022, repression and intimidation against local journalists, trade union activists, environmental defenders, and opposition figures has ramped up. The number of political prisoners doubled in the past 12 months. 200 people are currently held in jail on political grounds, including three of our EaP CSF colleagues, Gubad Ibadoghlu, Bakhtyar Hagiyevev and Aziz Orujov. Gubad Ibadoghlu, a renowned political economist, prominent opposition figure and a founding member of our organisation, has been in prison since last July and his life hangs by a thread as vital medications are denied to him.

We said it last year and I repeat it here today: the EU and all its member states must stop compromising on rule of law and human rights for the sake of the EU-Azerbaijan cooperation on energy. **One million cubic meters of gas are not equal to one dissident. We cannot “switch suppliers” from one tyrant to another.** If we learned something from our previous dependence on Russian gas, it's that it's **below us as Europeans** to pay with our money for a dictator's internal repression and external aggression.

Dear colleagues, if you end up deciding to travel to Baku this year for **COP29**, make it a point to first meet with Azeri activists and human rights defenders, both in diaspora and in Azerbaijan. Just ask about the human rights situation in the country. If you sign another contract, strategic partnership or energy memorandum, which Azerbaijan needs more than Europe does, you **have** the leverage to call for the release of all political prisoners. Before we boast on how our cooperation to buy Azeri green energy would help achieve EU's environment and climate goals, ask questions about the village of Soyudlu and the environmental protests that took place there in 2023 against the construction of a wastewater reservoir for a gold mine. Ask about the violent repression of the protestors by enforcement forces. The human rights crisis in Azerbaijan is no less important than the environment crisis. We in the EU made global commitments to care for both.

**Last but not least, I want to raise a point about security. If there's one lesson we learned since 2022, it's that the EU will never be secure until its entire neighborhood is secure, and that Russia is and will remain a threat to all of us.** No country knows this better than countries in the EaP, the Baltics, and Poland, and the rest of the EU has a lot to learn from the region's experience. Russia has waged or continues to wage war against almost all of our countries: from military aggression and occupation in Ukraine, to ongoing occupation and hybrid warfare in Moldova and Georgia, to political occupation in Belarus, and, again, hybrid warfare against (the democratically elected government of) Armenia. With the West, Russia weaponizes



everything: from energy, migration, sports, food, to the widespread use of disinformation and corruption of decision-makers. To this, we have only one response. **Arm Ukraine to the teeth with Russia's own money.** Use now the more than 300 bn USD in frozen Russian assets to give Ukraine everything it needs. Speed up negotiations for EU accession, now, before elections. Fight dictatorship in Belarus and Azerbaijan. Defend our own values and arm against aggression. Step up the fight with disinformation: pre-bunk Russian narratives, tell the truth before the lie spreads. Fight for our European values and turn the table.

None of us can do it alone. Neither individual EU member states, nor the EaP countries individually, neither governments nor civil society by itself. We, the civil society from EaP and EU, are and will continue to be your partners in this fight.

Thank you.