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**Address by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
at the 10th Eastern Partnership Informal Partnership Dialogue**

Session of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs

Dear Commissioner, Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to express my gratitude for providing me with an opportunity to speak on behalf of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Civil Society Forum at the 10th EaP Informal Partnership Dialogue. This year brings many significant historical anniversaries to commemorate in Europe. It is an important year marking the 100th anniversary of democratic republics' declaration in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine. During a short period, these countries enjoyed freedom and democratic development. 2018 will also mark another milestone in history textbooks. The people of Armenia have proven yet again that the desire for respect of human rights, rule of law and government serving the people is universal.

We have decided to hold our Annual Assembly in Tbilisi this year to underline the importance of the past and present developments. You are welcome to join us there to celebrate and discuss the way forward.

As recognised by this distinguished body and the EaP policy per se, the independent civil society is essential for providing input to the EaP reform agenda embodied by the 20 Deliverables for 2020 and for contributing to its implementation. It is also an indispensable element of active societies where citizens are engaged in the public sphere. The EU has already invested a lot of resources into the civil society in the region and we are thankful for that. At the same time, we are concerned about the proposal to unify most of the EU external funding instruments of territorial and thematic nature under one Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument within the next EU multiannual budget covering the period of 2021-2027. We would like to see clear guidelines ensuring that the current structure and approach to civil society support under European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), including the Civil Society Facility, will be kept and improved, allowing for greater flexibility and facilitating the EU support in environments where it is difficult for independent CSOs to operate.

We highly appreciate the role given to the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and its recognition as EU's best and only counterpart and ally to channel structured dialogue with civil society in the EaP region.

The reforms envisaged by the 2020 Deliverables agenda can only work if they are backed by a genuine commitment to democratic change on the part of the political leaderships of the EaP countries and if the EU member states and institutions firmly push for such a change. We will continue monitoring the implementation of the 2020 Deliverables and produce a monitoring report ahead of the next Ministerial meeting, featuring the input of the EaP civil society organisations.

We are glad to see the ongoing Human Rights Dialogues between the EU and EaP countries. The civil society is present at the EU-Moldova Human Rights Dialogues and is invited to parts of the EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogues. We call on other EaP countries to follow these countries' examples and open the doors of these meetings to the civil society.

We call for the attention to remain focused on the implementation of the crosscutting deliverables. Both the EU and national governments should work together to create an enabling environment for civil society. The EaP governments in particular, should uphold their commitments and work towards favourable conditions for the work of civil society organisations.

Armenia

The civil society is supportive of the efforts of the new government to fight corruption, crime and artificial monopolies. We highly estimate the results achieved in these areas during one month of the work of the new government. We hope that the ambitious reform agenda will be harmonised with the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between Armenia and the EU to ensure that the efforts of the authorities, civil society and the EU are focused on the same areas. The new government of Armenia faces serious challenges. A new system has to be put in place and popular support for the reform process will need to be maintained. The reform process will need to be bolstered with the financial support from the EU and the international community.

We are concerned that in spite of the important role given to civil society in CEPA, the role of the Armenian National Platform, the process for the creation of the bilateral platform envisioned by CEPA, as well as the ways of financing both platforms remain unclear.

Azerbaijan

We welcome the negotiations on the new Partnership Agreement between Azerbaijan and the EU and reiterate the importance of the presence of the human rights related clauses and conditionality in the agreement. We call on the authorities of Azerbaijan to stop the arbitrary detentions of opposition and human rights activists and other dissenting groups, the disbarring of human rights lawyers, and pressure on the independent news outlets in and outside the country.

We call on the authorities to implement comprehensive reforms of judiciary, based on recommendations of GRECO (Group of States against Corruption) of the Council of Europe

and to revise the legislation on freedom of assembly and association in accordance with the recommendations of the Venice Commission. We call on authorities to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, as stipulated in the 2020 Deliverables.

Belarus

We welcome the work of the EU and Belarus officials on the Partnership Priorities, their openness to the involvement of civil society in this process and look forward to the speedy signing and start of the implementation of the Priorities. Human rights should be at the core of the Priorities and the EU-Belarus cooperation. We would like to see a rigorous implementation of the National Human Rights Action Plan. We are ready to work with the government on the improvement of the enabling environment for the civil society, which is well placed to contribute to the reform process.

The reforms of higher education in the framework of the Bologna process should be more transparent and open for civil society participation. We commend a recently developed Draft Strategic Action Plan, to the implementation of which the Belarusian government should fully commit. It is key to implement in particular the guarantees of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. We call on the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus to recognise the Belarusian National Platform as stakeholder and partner for the Strategic Action Plan implementation.

Georgia

Georgia has seen its Prime Minister and the cabinet resign after a wave of protests. The citizens' trust into the justice system is low even after the three waves of judiciary reforms in the country. The investigation of the Afgan Mukhtarli case is ongoing but allegedly, there is not enough evidence to open the criminal investigation. We are concerned Georgia is no longer a place where human right defenders can feel safe.

We welcome the positive effects brought about by the introduction of the visa free regime – over 60.000 people travelled to the EU without visa since March 2017. The assessment of the AA/DCFTA implementation has been positive by both the European Commission and civil society. We also welcome the new Peace Initiative "A Step to Better Future". The authorities included the civil society views via a consultation process. We believe this package of measures will improve the lives of people living on both sides of the line dividing Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, providing access to education and health services and facilitating trade and government services. We call on the EU countries to contribute to the financial instrument designed to support the grassroots projects within this initiative across the line.

Moldova

We express our deep concern over the escalating pressure on the representatives of civil society fighting against corruption and state capture in Moldova and call on the Moldovan

authorities to stop attacks on the activists. We condemn the non-transparent and baseless invalidation of the mandate of Andrei Nastase in the Chisinau mayoral election by the Chisinau City Court and call on all European Union institutions and EU member states to take a strong stance on this violation of democratic principles. The invalidation of the elections in such a manner undermines the trust of the Moldovan people in the state institutions. Unless the EU has a strong institutional reaction to defend fundamental democratic principles, it will be viewed as condoning the abuse.

We are concerned about the Dniester River and Novodnistrovsk hydropower plant agreement prepared for signing by Moldova and Ukraine. We stress the need to carry out the environmental impact assessment before the signing. The civil societies of Moldova and Ukraine are united against building the six new hydropower plants on the Ukrainian segment of the Dniester river that would have grave consequences for Moldova especially and cause desertification, soil erosion and lack of fresh water.

Ukraine

We support the efforts of the Ukrainian government to recover its citizens detained in Russia. In particular, the EU member states and EU institutions in support of the efforts of the Ukrainian Ombudsman Office should raise the case of Oleg Sentsov, sentenced to 20 years on charges of plotting terrorist attack. We are concerned over the opening of the Crimean Bridge, which can effectively facilitate massive militarisation of the peninsula. We are also concerned about the lack of information coming from Crimea and the human rights situation there. We call on the Ukrainian authorities to reconsider their policy on access to Crimea and facilitate the work of journalists and activists.

We welcome the adoption of the Law on the High Anti-Corruption Court. However, it is worrisome that the provisions on appealing the already ongoing high-profile cases may hinder its application, effectively weakening the institution and delaying its work. We call on the Ukrainian authorities to ensure the unrestrained activity of anti-corruption NGOs. We welcome the adoption of the human rights strategy and action plan and the headway on the gender mainstreaming agenda and we hope the proper implementation will follow, supported by the strengthened institutional setting. We hope the reform process will not stop in light of the upcoming elections next year.

Thank you for your attention.

Delivered by Mikalai Kvantaliani, member of the EaP CSF Steering Committee, Country facilitator for Belarus