

*Speech by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum*

**22<sup>nd</sup> June 2021**

**\*\*\*Check against delivery\*\*\***

Thank you, Mr/Ms Chair,

Dear ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the EaP CSF, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak here today. We were pleased to be included in the preparation of the meeting and we welcome the ambitious commitments included in the draft Presidency Conclusions.

Since the last time we met, EaP roadmaps obligations and EU assistance have provided solid support to the advancement of environmental protection and energy policy reform in EaP countries. There is no doubt that the European Green Deal and EaP policy beyond 2020 offers new opportunities for EaP countries. We welcome the European Commission's initiative that environmental and climate issues will finally be cross-cutting in the new EaP agenda. We, as a civil society, want to contribute to EGD implementation and maximize its benefits for the citizens.

However, today we must look at the situation as it really is, with a healthy dose of realism, resisting the temptation to look at the issues through rose coloured glasses. Only an honest assessment will allow for better implementation of the new agenda.

There are a number of critical problems: weak environmental governance, important delays in the adoption of primary or secondary legislation; faulty implementation - particularly of SEA and EIA laws; the lack of national environmental monitoring systems, which prevents effective evidence-based policy; limited progress in adapting to climate change; lack of prospects for the introduction of a circular economy, problems with waste management; critical loss of biodiversity and degradation of ecosystems; problems with the expansion and functioning of nature reserves; the critical condition of rivers and weak progress in their sustainable management; weak enforcement and lack of transparency and consultation with stakeholders are the most visible ones. To address these problems, I urge us to start by asking ourselves some key questions:

- Have we achieved the planned deliverables by 2020?
- Why do these achievements not meet civil society's expectations?

- And consequently - what lessons should we learn for the future?

If we want the 2021-2025 EaP framework to be effective, we have to focus on two important stumbling blocks that are currently undermining the ambitious goals set by the European Green Deal and enshrined in the draft Presidency Conclusions.

The first is the persistently **weak environmental governance and institutions**.

Despite AA and CEPA provisions aimed at the strengthening of the institutional framework, **EaP Environmental institutions still lack adequate capacity to ensure proper environmental protection and fight climate change**. The lack of clear divisions of the legislative, economic and control functions between public authorities continues to hamper the functioning of environmental authorities.

To solve all these problems, EaP countries need closer cooperation with the EU, the current level is clearly insufficient. If we want the 2021-2025 EaP framework to be effective, public administration reform in the environmental protection sector should be prioritised.

- The merging of environmental ministries with other ministries should be undone; this model factually creates a conflict between the competing interests of polluting industries and of environmental protection.
- Good environmental governance, based on a transparent and inclusive decision-making process, should be one of the requirements of financial, economic and sectoral support to the EaP countries.
- Future monitoring mechanisms should be qualitative and focus on the implementation – not only on the adoption – of environmental laws.
- Public funds for environmental protection should be increased and spent only for environmental purposes.
- The functions of policy planning, implementation, prevention and control should be separated among ministries, agencies and inspectorates.

**My second point has to do with civil society participation.**

Good environmental governance requires openness, participation, and accountability. At present, civil society is still too often excluded from effective participation in policy making. This should improve.

1. The absence of legal requirements providing for CSOs participation in the decision-making process still prevents the effective contribution of civil society to the process of green reform. The fact that in Belarus and Azerbaijan civil society representatives do not have a structured dialogue with the Ministries of Environment negatively affects the chances of environmental protection in these countries even further.
2. Wide public engagement at the earliest stages of policy preparation required by the Aarhus Convention is still not guaranteed. Imperfect or limited access to information still hinders CSOs' ability to monitor progress and hold governments to account, even when laws on access to information exist.

These obstacles lead to the formulation of ineffective laws or to weak implementation at best, and to conflict between local communities and the State at worst.

If we want the 2021-2025 EaP framework and the European Green Deal to be successful in the EaP, civil society has to be involved at all levels: policy formulation, implementation and monitoring.

- Firstly, responsible ministries should develop dialogues with civil society organisations. The rules for such dialogues to be jointly agreed by all parties and be based on clear procedures.
- Secondly, state institutions should actively cooperate with civil society and capitalise on their ability to raise awareness within EaP societies, where environmental consciousness remains relatively low.
- Thirdly, a portion of the funding for the period 2021-2027 should be allocated for projects aimed at promoting environmental awareness as well as public campaigns calling for the implementation of the relevant environmental legislation.
- And lastly, civil society should be given more opportunities to participate in projects held under EU4Environment, EU4Climate and EU4Energy.

To conclude, EaP countries have the potential to **improve their climate, energy and environmental protection**. In order to realise this potential, the new deliverables and the 2021-2025 framework should be geared towards institutional strengthening, better implementation and support for effective civil society involvement.

EaP countries must become full participants in achieving Europe's climate neutrality. Nature and climate change have no boundaries. To do this, it is necessary to abandon short-term economic goals, to act strategically and with foresight. The future Eastern Partnership will not



only improve the climate and environmental resilience of our countries, but also ensure the synergy of national policies with the European Green Deal, which will promote the region's further integration into the European Union.