

Speech by Sofia Strive, Co-chair of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum delivered at the Eastern Partnership Senior Officials Meeting on September 16, 2021

Brussels, 16 September 2021

On behalf of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, I Sofia Strive, the co-chair of the Steering Committee, would like to thank you for the invitation to this online meeting dedicated to the Eastern Partnership post-2020 and the 6th EaP Summit.

This past year has presented a number of unpredictable and unprecedented challenges for civil society in the region, as I am sure you are aware. Therefore, I hope you will take civil society's suggestions and wishes into serious consideration when you continue the discussion today and at upcoming events this autumn, leading up to the EaP Summit and the introduction of a new framework and priorities in the region.

We are entering another very important period for the future of the Eastern Partnership, marked by a new policy approach, new single financial instrument Global Europe - NDICI and new EaP architecture. As civil society, we would like to strongly underline, yet again, our commitment to contributing to the success and coherence of this new era. At the same time, it is our mission to voice our concerns and suggestions to make sure it delivers for the benefit of society as a whole, for every citizen of the EaP countries, without leaving anyone behind.

Before I present our main messages on the JSWD, I would like to raise the EaP CSF's concerns regarding the COVID-19 vaccination process in the Eastern Partnership countries. While we appreciate the COVAX mechanism and direct donations or resales by EU Member States, this is not working fast enough to prepare us for the upcoming third wave. Therefore, we urge the EU to top up the existing procurements for their neighboring countries to levels that assure that at least 70% of the population gets vaccinated.

Now, let me reflect on the JSWD. The new agenda formulated in this document offers a proactive, growth-oriented approach with a series of very ambitious objectives and measurable targets that have been set to support the development of SMEs and investment in green and digital transformation. We welcome that the EU will continue to promote an enabling environment for civil society through favourable regulatory frameworks in line with international standards. And we do of course also appreciate that the EU will double its support to grassroots organisations, support which is particularly important amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing challenge of shrinking civic space in the region. At the same time, we wish to emphasise that there

should be more accountability for delivering on the objective of supporting civil society. We believe it would be effective if the progress the countries make in enabling civil society to operate is linked to economic benefits offered by the new agenda.

And now, to one point that I cannot emphasise enough. We, the EaP CSF, strongly believe that resilience has to be linked to core values. We have to jointly make sure that important values such as human rights, rule of law and democratic accountability are at the basis for building resilience and the future of the EaP as such. In this sense, EaP CSF would like to see a more comprehensive approach in the governance part of the new agenda and better defined benchmarks and indicators that would facilitate monitoring of the joint delivery of the respective targets. Citizens of the EaP should be re-assured that democratic governance is at the heart of strengthening resilience through the new policy agenda and that joint delivery also means joint accountability.

Now, I will look forward and focus on the implementation of the new agenda. As civil society, we stand ready to contribute to the implementation of the new agenda and JSWD under the updated architecture, to provide our policy inputs, and contribute to the Top Ten Targets, so that the real impact can be achieved in all parts of the region. Nevertheless, this cannot be achieved without meaningful participation of civil society in the decision making process. In order to ensure that the implementation of the agenda is sustainable and inclusive, it is important that CSOs are involved in a regular, meaningful and structured dialogue on the national and regional level. The challenges of these past years have opened up new forms of civic participation that allow citizens and CSOs to participate in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies. It has also enabled civil society to monitor how money is being used and where and how it is invested, which leads to more transparency and accountability.

And lastly, I would like to turn to Belarus. The summer of 2021 marked two important events. First, one year since the fraudulent presidential elections in Belarus. And second, the MFA of Belarus announced the suspension of the country's participation in both the Eastern Partnership policy and the Readmission Agreement. The international community has helplessly witnessed Belarus' further descent along the path of authoritarianism. However, we strongly believe that self-exclusion of the Belarusian state should not lead to automatic exclusion of Belarusian society. The EaP CSF, together with the Belarusian National Platform of the Forum and the other National Platforms in the region, will strive now, more than ever, to represent and channel the voice of Belarusian citizens at the Eastern Partnership Summit and within the newly-revised EaP architecture. When there is an absence of state or regime participation, it is vital to ensure maximum integration of non-state actors and civil society.

To sum up and turn towards the EaP Summit. The current challenges in the EaP region are unprecedented and reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, political crises and shrinking civic space. Notwithstanding these tough times, we want the 6th EaP Summit in December to send a strong message about the transformational ambitions of the new agenda. We also hope that the Summit could reflect the EU's intention to assist in leveraging the EaP countries' economic power,



enhanced by the investment pillar, and to collaborate jointly in addressing the global challenges arising from the climate crisis as well as the new possibilities and risks associated with using new digital technologies. But most importantly, we hope that the EaP Summit and the new agenda will be based on core values and an inclusive approach where civil society is meaningfully included in every step of the way.

Thank you for your attention, and I sincerely hope that you will take these messages from the civil society into consideration when you continue the discussion and shape the framework for the future of this region.