

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 October 13, 2020

On behalf of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, I would like to thank you for the invitation to this online meeting.

Since the last time we saw each other, there have been challenging developments across the EaP region. The people of Belarus have given us all a remarkable lesson in commitment, innovation, and bravery when peacefully protesting on the streets. As I speak, they continue fighting for basic political and human rights, decency and freedom, undaunted by the violent response from the illegitimate regime. And only two weeks ago, violence erupted once again in Nagorno Karabakh, and innocent civilians have been losing dear ones. The genuine civil society sectors in Armenia and Azerbaijan have called for an end to the escalation of the conflict, and are deeply concerned about the human costs and further scars on the soul of both nations.

On top of that, important elections are coming up in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova - a litmus test that will reveal if the countries are truly committed to strengthening their democratic credentials. Ensuring that elections are organised in a democratic and transparent manner is of the utmost importance, and we hope the EU will help us to monitor the elections and ensure that the vote of each citizen is protected and respected.

Now more on **Belarus**. Although the media attention might have faded, the peaceful protests in Belarus continue tirelessly and are still met with brutal police violence. During the past weekend around 600 peaceful protesters and civil society activists, including some members of our Forum, were detained with the use of excessive violence.

The social movement in Belarus today includes millions of people, from all social strata of the population, and all regions and cities. Political participation, social solidarity, and bottom-up self-organisation have become features of the Belarusian society and need to be further developed and supported. The people of Belarus are key for the successful democratic transformation in the country, and the way in which the political crisis in Belarus is resolved will have implications far beyond its borders. We are standing with the Belarusian people, who are raising their voices to demand change and to write their own history, and we hope that the EU is too, since solidarity and support to these brave Belarusians is vital.

On **Nagorno Karabakh**. We reaffirm our call to peace expressed in our statement issued on 1 October. We strongly condemn attempts to resolve the conflict through military means and the involvement of any third party not contributing to peace. We call on the two conflicting parties to implement immediate actions to end the violence on the line of contact, re-establish dialogue, and undertake all the steps necessary for the resumption of peaceful negotiations and confidence

building mechanisms. If this violent conflict continues, it will pose a threat not only to the countries directly implicated, but also to their neighbours, and the entire region.

Now, turning to the **new EaP Deliverables**. While the ‘20 Deliverables for 2020’ rightly set ambitious targets across a number of priority areas, many of these are yet to be realised - particularly in the area of good governance, rule of law and democratic standards. To help deliver in those areas, strategic and consistent use of conditionality is key. Macrofinancial and economic support should be used to leverage progress in this respect. **The new roadmap should articulate a mechanism for transferring EU funding from non-compliant governments to reform-oriented actors and civil society, beyond the established practice and in line with the ‘more for more’ principle.**

In addition, monitoring and oversight of any assistance under the EaP needs to be improved. Any citizen should be able to see how much money is going where and what it achieves. To achieve this, we believe that rigorous monitoring systems by civil society should be part of all kinds of provided assistance.

We also think that there should be **greater coherence to the EaP policy priorities within the new roadmap**. The overarching theme of ‘resilience’ does this to some extent, but more can be done - for example, by effectively mainstreaming the new ‘cross-cutting’ deliverables. In order to do this, we urge the EU to elaborate further on how the cross-cutting priorities will be implemented under each of the five policy areas as well as to clarify concrete targets under individual deliverables.

On a final note, the EaP post-2020 should offer more opportunities for deeper integration with the EU for those EaP countries that are ready and willing to proceed in this direction: the offer, however, should be carefully calibrated and include different incentives that would become available only upon achieving specific targets. That said, I also want to underline that it is now more important than ever that we continue to support regional cooperation to further emphasise that the EaP is a region that is stronger together.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to continuing the discussion.