

17 June 2016

**Open letter by the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
to His Holiness Pope Francis**

Your Holiness,

You will soon be visiting Armenia. In autumn you will be in Azerbaijan and Georgia. The citizens and the rulers, as well as the religious leaders in these countries and their congregations, will be listening carefully to the message you deliver in public and in private. Your words will carry a special weight as they will come at a time when the threat of a return to war hangs over Armenia and Azerbaijan and the resulting destabilisation could affect the entire Caucasus region.

We, the representatives of civil society in the Eastern Partnership countries, which include the states you will be visiting as well as Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, appeal to you to do your utmost to help bring lasting peace and respect for human rights to this region.

On his visit to Baku in 2002 Pope John Paul II said to politicians: „Your specific activity is the service of the common good, the promotion of legality and justice, the guarantee of freedom and prosperity for all. [...] Politics requires honesty and accountability. The people should be able to feel understood and protected. [...] Those who accept responsibility for administering public affairs cannot deceive themselves: people do not forget! Just as they remember with gratitude those who have laboured honestly in the service of the common good, so they pass on to their children and grandchildren bitter criticism of those who abused power to enrich themselves.” (Address of the Holy Father at a meeting with religious and political, cultural and arts representatives, Baku Presidential Palace, Wednesday, 22 May 2002)

Unfortunately, this message remains valid today in many of our countries where political and economic corruption is rampant and human rights are not respected. This message remains especially pertinent in those Eastern Partnership countries where political prisoners continue to languish in detention and for whom we ask you to intercede with their country's rulers.

Peace and respect for human rights are essential if an ecumenical dialogue is to flourish in our region between Christian denominations themselves and with other faiths, some of which today carry the seed of radicalism. Indeed, religious leaders in the region must be encouraged to do more in their work for peace among their peoples.

Peace and respect for human rights are inextricably connected. Peace must come to the Caucasus and with it freedom, both of which Pope John Paul II called for. We hope that your words will inspire the leaders you will meet and will encourage them to choose a political path enabling them to rule in the spirit of the address delivered in Baku 14 years ago.

With every best wish to Your Holiness.

Sincerely yours,

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