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УСХОДНЯГА ПАРТНЁРСТВА

**The statement**

**of the Belarusian National Platform  
of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership  
on the eve of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga**

**«GEOPOLITICAL CRISIS IN THE REGION:  
THE NEEDS AND CHALLENGES TO REFORM THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE»**

*19 May 2015*

*We, participants of the Belarusian National Platform of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership, express our concern about the situation in the Eastern Partnership region, as well as the current condition and development of the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative as a whole.*

Since the moment the Eastern Partnership initiative started to be implemented, the general situation in our region has considerably changed.

The stability and safety of the Eastern Partnership region are undermined by the Russian Federation's blatant military and information aggression upon Ukraine, which has already resulted in numerous fatalities and the occupation of a part of Ukraine's territory by pro-Russian armed groups, and which is the cause of the destabilization in Eastern and Southern Ukraine.

The people of Ukraine supported the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union and tried to peacefully change the authorities that sabotaged the Ukrainian people's will. Being guided by its imperial and antidemocratic motives, Russia carries out its purposeful aggression upon Ukraine in order to debar the free geopolitical choice of the Ukrainian people and to destroy this example of society's free will and democratic self-organization in the region that it considers to be part of the so-called "Russian World".

The process of the other Eastern Partnership countries' rapprochement with the European Union is also faced with the rigorous resistance of Russia that uses impermissible methods of economic, political, and military blackmail.

Belarusian society has also become an object of Russia's information warfare; many people are intimidated by the fact that the real war is near our borders. The threat to Belarus' independence is increasing; however, in this situation, the Belarusian authorities **do not make any efforts to democratize** public life and to liberate the energy necessary for consolidation in the face of the common threat.

The number of political prisoners does not decrease in Belarus. The state continues to pass and enforce death sentences. **None of repressive acts** against independent public initiatives and their activists **is cancelled**. The independent mass media and publishing houses are being persecuted. There is still the command-and-control economic model; economic activities of the population are being oppressed by legislative restrictions.

**The situation is being worsened by the authorities' new actions before the approaching presidential election.** They have enacted a law that limits the freedom of speech even more and that allows to discriminate the

independent internet media. Human right defending experts are being expelled from the country; journalists are regularly pressurized for their cooperation with the foreign mass media.

Despite the authorities' rhetoric about neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian war, **Russia's military presence is growing** in Belarus. The Russian propaganda mass media are being broadcast without restrictions, while the values connected with the Belarusian people's identity, i.e. the Belarusian language, culture, and historical memory, still have no state institutional support and remain marginalized.

We think that **the expansion of the valuable basis in society** is the foundation of its consolidation in the face of danger. Such values as freedom and independence, including economic one, the Belarusian language and culture, human rights, and citizens' responsible and moral position, which are crucial for the Belarusian democratic state, should be the ground and the purpose of civil society's practical and educational activity.

We state that today the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative has not created any mechanisms of the adequate answer to the external and internal challenges of the partner countries' development. The crisis of the Eastern Partnership is obvious as the initiative is not able to counter the Russian intervention, the fact that Armenia has left the path of its rapprochement with the EU, problems of developing the multilateral dimension of the initiative, the conservation of the authoritarian regimes in Belarus and Azerbaijan, and mass infringements of human rights in the Eastern Partnership region.

Despite the political crisis, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have taken decisive steps towards their rapprochement with the European Union by initiating and signing the Association Agreements with the EU. Although, of course, this process is of a positive character, in the Eastern Partnership there may be a problem of isolation of these leading countries from the others - the multilateral format of the Eastern Partnership may gradually be replaced by exclusively mutual relations. In the long term, it may lead to the isolation and marginalization of relations with the countries-outsiders of European integration (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus).

One of not numerous successful formats of multilateral interaction within the framework of the Eastern Partnership is still the Civil Society Forum and its National Platforms. The Forum has proved its role as an international platform of wide interaction between civil societies of the Eastern Partnership countries and the EU.

Proceeding from the aforesaid, we express the following suggestions:

1. The existing format of the Eastern Partnership as a program aimed mainly at state structures should be **corrected in favor of societies of the partner countries**. The civil societies' decorative representation in the EaP as a whole should be replaced by the real mechanism of civil societies' obligatory participation in bilateral and multilateral formats of the EaP; civil societies must have tools of influence and control (in particular – anticorruption ones).
2. Within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, **separate mechanisms of cooperation with such countries as Belarus** should be developed; the European future is to be chosen by a free society, but not by power. Thus, it is **civil society** that has to be **priority in international contacts with Belarus**.
3. The creation of the **common informational (and by that - axiological) space** of the EU and the partner countries becomes a strategic direction, which value was not envisaged in the initial format of the Eastern Partnership. We consider it necessary to stipulate informational cooperation as a special direction of the EaP and to make it priority when it comes to the support of the Belarusian independent mass media.
4. Under the aegis of the EaP, fast steps **aimed directly at citizens** of partner countries can be implemented - unilateral cancellation of visas, expansion of the EU's educational programs, credit and other support of small business, cultural exchanges, programs of developing contacts between people, etc.
5. We expect from international structures and free countries, which declare their assistance to the democratic prospect of Belarus, the understanding that **the current ruling regime as a whole cannot be reformed** and that **it is not the guarantor of Belarus' independence**. However, democratic countries' consecutive and solidary position can compel it to temporarily reduce its repressions. Therefore, all actions

aimed at both bilateral and multilateral cooperation with official Minsk have to be conditioned by the authorities' concrete steps to restore civil liberties - first of all, the release and rehabilitation of political prisoners and the termination of pressure upon civil society and the independent mass media; as well as steps to really reduce the political, economic, and informational dependence on Russia.

On behalf of the organizations-participants of the Belarusian National Platform of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership (69 organizations in total) – the Coordinating Committee of the BNP:

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