

Brussels, 22 July 2014

Closer economic integration must go hand in hand with strategic focus on human rights, civil liberties and joint security in next phase of Eastern Partnership – *Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum*

Proposals of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Steering Committee to the Eastern Partnership ministerial meeting, 22 July 2014

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum proposes:

- **appointment of European Commissioner for Civil Society and Human Rights,**
 - **immediate release of all political prisoners in Partner countries,**
 - **strong support for unity of Ukraine against Russian interference and aggression,**
 - **greater defence and security co-operation, including joint energy security policy, between EU and Partner countries**
-

Dear High Representative, Dear Commissioner, Dear Ministers,

Thank you for the invitation to address today's ministerial meeting. The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum wishes to reiterate its support for the Eastern Partnership as an effective mechanism of promoting democratic reforms, including the establishment of the rule of law and sustainable market mechanisms, in the six Eastern Partner countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine.

We hope that the EU member states and EU Council will build on the sanctions imposed to date to send a clear, consistent and united signal to the Russian government that its military interference in Ukraine, both its annexation of Crimea and arming of separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, is illegal and unacceptable. With the deaths of hundreds of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians in the past two months, and the flight of thousands of Ukrainian civilians from Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, **international humanitarian aid and political support is essential to stop the loss of human life and emerging refugee crisis on the EU's doorstep in Ukraine.** The tragedy of the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines civilian flight MH17 only reinforces the lawlessness and lack of respect for human rights and international law that now prevails in the separatist-held territories. Moreover, in recognition of the hard security issues at stake, **we urge the EU to include the United States of America as a fourth partner to join Ukraine, the EU, and Russia in peace-building talks.**

We would like to commend the work undertaken by Commissioner Štefan Füle and High Representative Catherine Ashton, and European Union member states, for their commitment to human rights in the region and for the fact that they have spoken up when these rights have been infringed. We believe that their legacy should be further strengthened in the new European Commission to take office on 1 November 2014 by **the institution of the office of a new European Commissioner for Civil Society and Human Rights** – to cover civil society and human rights within the EU and beyond, and to work hand in hand with the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, and with the European External Action Service. The appointment in 2012 of the first EU Special Representative for Human Rights was a step in the right direction, and the Commissioner for Civil Society and Human Rights would place a top priority for the European Neighbourhood east and south at the heart of the Commission in a union whose very basis rests on a common commitment to democracy, human rights, and civil liberties.

Civil society organisations are drivers of democratic reforms and hold governments accountable to their promises, and we welcome the increased engagement with both EU and Eastern Partnership governments in the governmental platforms and ministerial meetings through the permanent participant status granted to the Civil Society Forum. We look forward to welcoming high-level representatives of EU member states and Eastern Partner countries to the fifth annual Civil Society Forum meeting that will take place in Tbilisi, Georgia, on 20-21 November 2014. We would also be delighted if the heads of the EU Delegations in the six Partner countries were to attend.

The Civil Society Forum will continue to mobilise national and international awareness of both progress and shortcomings in Partner countries, and at the same time **we are [is] committed to playing a full part, engaging with governments and with EU delegations, particularly in areas fundamental to sustainable democratic development and the protection of human rights: free elections, freedom of the media, an independent judiciary, the rule of law, and the fight against corruption.**

Regional security, stability and democracy should be given greater prominence as shared priorities for EU member states and the Partner countries. **The threat, in economic and security spheres, posed by Russia, should be addressed in a strategic, sustainable way, and should be supplemented by concerted efforts to counter one-sided Russian propaganda** through support for independent electronic media in local languages and for a new international broadcaster that should set new standards in reporting standards and news values in the Eastern Partnership region in both Russian and other major languages. The priority planned by the Latvian EU Council Presidency in 2015 for a focus on media freedom in the Eastern Partnership countries can give the issue the high attention it deserves.

The Steering Committee calls on all Partner countries to sign a **Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms – enshrining promotion and protection of human rights, freedoms of association, assembly, and speech, safeguards for independent media, and the right to participate in free and fair elections.** Adherence to the Charter should be one of the non-negotiable conditions for EU technical and financial assistance, and for closer integration.

The Eastern Partnership presents an opportunity for closer integration of the six Eastern Partner countries with the EU, but also for enhanced co-operation between the six countries. We call upon the EU and the Partner country governments to:

- provide **new impetus to the multilateral track** of the Eastern Partnership initiative, and to agree on more economic incentives that will be mutually beneficial for the Partner countries, including **consultations to alleviate the impact of real and potential trade disruptions and restrictions adopted by Russia;**
- **enhance the level of integration of Eastern Partner governments into the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP),** moving beyond just sending civil CSDP missions or advisers;
- **increase EU engagement in the resolution of frozen conflicts** (Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia) which pose a lasting obstacle to democracy and EU integration, as well as leverage for manipulation and interference by the Russian government, as further evidenced by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea;
- **elaborate a common approach for joint energy security policy in the format EU+EaP** to decrease the possible use of Russia's energy supplies as political leverage on Eastern Partners and EU members
- **continue and deepen consultations with Russia (including the introduction of multilateral EU-Russia-Georgia-Moldova-Ukraine consultations) on the terms of the EU-Partner country Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreements** and their compatibility with free trade agreements between Partner countries and Russia, and other bilateral trade agreements;
- **consider the creation of an EU investment fund for Eastern Partners** to support the multilateral initiatives of partner countries (3+) in the region.

The Eastern Partnership initiative has successfully ushered in a new phase of European integration for Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine upon the signature in June 2014 of their Association Agreements with the EU. The signing of the Association Agreements turns a new page for these three countries, but this is only the beginning of a transformation process which requires political will, unity, and determination from both the EU and the Partner countries.

We call on the three partner countries to quickly elaborate the Action Plans of the Association Agreements with direct consultation and involvement of the respective National Platforms of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, and to start with the implementation of the agreements as soon as possible.

We call on the EU member states to promptly ratify the Association Agreements and to be ready to offer a membership perspective to countries demonstrating substantive progress in reform implementation. In the case of Ukraine, as part of the peace-building efforts, we urge the EU to elaborate **a three-year Marshall Plan for Ukraine (2014-2016) to overcome the consequences of the financial and economic crisis caused by the military aggression of Russia and the devastating management of the country by the regime of former President Viktor Yanukovich**. Budget support for post-conflict reconstruction should be a high priority for Donbas and other war-damaged parts of Ukraine.

We call on the EU institutions to impose strict conditionality and closely monitor the implementation of reforms envisaged by the Association Agreements/DCFTA agreements, as well as to provide technical assistance, and transparent and conditional financial support packages, to the governments of Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine for implementing reforms.

We call on both the EU and the Partner governments to recognise the National Platforms of the Civil Society Forum as the civil society platforms to be created under the Association Agreements. Great efforts have been made by the National Platform in Ukraine to include democratic social partners that support the European integration process. **We urge the European Commission and the government of Ukraine to embrace the inclusive approach taken by the National Platform in Ukraine, which will guard against the inclusion of anti-democratic forces that oppose the European integration process, and is structured around 15 thematic groups reflecting the contents of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement**. We would welcome the engagement of the European Economic and Social Committee with the Ukraine National Platform in supporting the creation and development of democratic, EU-oriented social partners in Ukraine within the framework of a civil society platform representing democratic, representative organisations.

We call upon the government of Georgia to speed up the reforms envisaged by the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan (VLAP), and to establish a consultation mechanism with the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Georgian National Platform visa sub-group. We also call upon the government of Georgia to make more transparent the judicial process concerning charges against former government officials.

The Civil Society Forum is convinced that the mutual benefits of closer European integration must be given priority in all Partner countries without differentiation with respect to the level of progress at the governmental level. The EU should continue to treat the Partner countries on an equal basis, consistently applying the “more for more” principle to reward reform champions.

The commitment expressed by both the EU and the Partner countries to democratic standards and respect for civil society is central to sustainable economic and social development. We welcome the release of Ales Bialiatski, a courageous human rights defender in Belarus. **It is unacceptable to have any political prisoners, and the persistence of political prisoners in Belarus, and the increasing number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan, including colleagues in the Civil Society Forum who have been imprisoned**

solely for speaking up for democratic standards and human rights, seriously undermines the prospects for European integration in the region.

The negotiations on a new Strategic Modernisation Partnership between the EU and Azerbaijan are underway with no consultations with civil society or the wider public. Moreover, the negotiations are taking place against the background of an intensified crackdown on civil society (freezing bank accounts of the most active national and international NGOs – including two organisations represented on this year’s Steering Committee of the Civil Society Forum – and criminal prosecutions of civil society leaders, based on trumped up charges). In a democratic society, context analysis, impact assessment, and stakeholder consultations are indispensable components of effective, sustainable policymaking.

On 26 May 2014 last year’s Civil Society Forum Working Group 1 Co-ordinator, Anar Mammadli, Chair of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDS), was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison on blatantly false charges. Anar Mammadli was nominated in 2014 for the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, an annual award presented by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. **Just a week ago, on 14 July 2014, Hasan Huseynli, head of “Intelligent Citizen”, another devoted community leader and civil rights activist in Azerbaijan, was sentenced to six years in prison on charges that have drawn protests from the international diplomatic community.**

Civil society in Azerbaijan is at the forefront of support for democratic values and for more dynamic progress on European integration. **More than 100 civil society organisations and leaders have signed an appeal to the government to speed up EU integration so that Azerbaijan can also embark upon the process of reaching an Association Agreement with the EU.**

The Civil Society Forum calls upon all EU member states to exert maximum pressure on the government of Azerbaijan to cease its legal and extra-judicial harassment of civil society organisations, opposition politicians, independent journalists and concerned citizens working to strengthen and protect freedom of expression and human rights in the country.

Welcoming steps towards the signing by Belarus of the Visa Facilitation Agreement, as well as the revival of a dialogue between the Belarusian authorities and the EU, we note that human rights violations, political pressure and prosecution of public and political activists remain a constant obstacle to democratic development. We regret that Belarus has recently become part of the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC) with Russia that in its current state closes opportunities for its members to develop parallel integration with the EU. Nevertheless, **EU engagement with all sectors of society with a view to sustainable democratic development and closer European integration should be a re-stated priority in EU relations with Belarus,** and the European Dialogue on Modernisation should be strengthened, and its multi-stakeholder nature deepened.

In Armenia, the National Platform of the Civil Society Forum has made clear its dissatisfaction with the about-turn of the government after completion of negotiations on the Association Agreement and DCFTA, and, together with other civic forces and political movements in Armenia, has launched European Choice, a new grouping to promote Armenia’s European integration and to reject entry into the Eurasian Economic Union with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Before last year’s decision of the country’s leadership to join the Customs Union, the Armenian National Platform had achieved a promising level of dialogue with the government on the reform agenda. After the change of direction by the government, the National Platform had to limit its respective ambitions and expectations. It tried to broaden the choice of partners in the political domain, addressing those who remained committed to closer co-operation with the EU. At the same time the National Platform is open for interaction with the authorities and to make its contribution to the most effective use of the EU’s budget support through engagement in policy dialogue in

those areas where the national government shows a readiness to proceed in line with the draft Association Agreement.

Civil society in those countries that do not have Association Agreements need more attention than before. We call on the EU member states to apply all diplomatic instruments at their disposal to push for the immediate release of all political prisoners, and to place civil liberties and human rights at the centre of the Eastern Partnership initiative.

Thank you for your attention.