

STATEMENT of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on the EU-Moldova Association Agreement and Visa Liberalization Process

Year 2013 has been regarded as a historical milestone for the Republic of Moldova and its partner countries within the Eastern Partnership dimension of the European political and economic integration processes.

Republic of Moldova is taking a truly European role usually played by EU Member States by hosting the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum in Chisinau, where prominent leaders and representatives of civil society of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine and European Union meet to coordinate European integration agendas, share success stories and further endorse the European pursuit of their countries. The recognition of this role is a positive signal for Moldova in the eve of the Vilnius Summit in November 2013 and further actions

The enacting and, hopefully, future signing, of the Association Agreements with its constituent Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) and further progress on the visa liberalization agreements are laying the ground for spectacular political, economic and social transformations aiming at intertwining the societies, economies and government structures of the six European post-Soviet countries from the Eastern Partnership region, with those from the European Union. Along political, economic and social integration, these agreements are the embodiment of the newly-asserted sovereignty of the Eastern Partnership States. For Moldova, inasmuch as for Georgia and Ukraine, where the shift of this era are most probable to come soon, the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius bears very high stakes and very high expectations from the societies of these countries.

The success of the Vilnius Summit for Moldova depends directly on the credibility of its outcomes: the Association Agreements and the visa liberalization regime for Moldovan citizens. The language around these outcomes is, nevertheless, uncertain. In the most optimistic outcome, Ukraine will sign, while Moldova and Georgia will enact, or initial their Association Agreements and their constituent DCFTAs with the EU with prospects of signing in a period of up to several years. Visa liberalization may occur when the technical conditionalities are fulfilled and following political decisions in the EU.

The choice of association with the EU and further European integration over the Eurasian one has cost a lot of political effort in Moldova. European integration has for years been the center stage of political battles and debates, which have not been concluded yet: a rather important part of society is still uncertain of the choice and has not been convinced of the utility of future benefits of Moldova's European integration.

Civil society in Moldova needs to emphasize that the stakes of European integration are high, while the policy processes lack transparency and the incentives are uncertain. Moldova and the EU have already concluded the negotiations on the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (AA/DCFTA). Despite an opaque negotiation process, by which both EU and the Moldovan government avoided publicity and sound, substantial public dialogue, the AA/DCFTA will start implementation, soon after the November EaP Summit in Vilnius. The visa liberalization process has shared many similarities to AA/DCFTA negotiation. Public consultations rarely go beyond the description of the process and focus less on substance, let alone on the possible impacts and costs of reforms.

The uncertainty and lack of knowledge nurtured by the opaqueness of the negotiations on key European integration processes in Moldova is heavily exploited by the external and internal actors wishing to ridicule and thwart the pro-EU stance of Moldova. Political and economic pressure from Russian Federation, diffusion of myths of post-DCFTA economic doomsday and never-coming visa liberalization are instrumented along conflictual geopolitical discourse. The distant economic benefits and free movement of Moldovans in the EU is enthusiastically juxtaposed to the imminence of immediate shocks from revision of trade rules, wine and fruit embargoes and abolition of free travel with Russia in case European integration will be chosen over Eurasian Customs and Economic spaces. Support for European integration declines and there are clear signs of fatigue.

Moldovans need a tangible incentive to continue with the European integration. Visa liberalization is by far the most immediate and visible stimulus. Moldova has shown the foremost progress regionally in the visa liberalization process by carrying out sound institutional and technical reform of border management and migration control, documents' security and is advancing in assuring full control on the central border segment of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border, thus providing solutions for the challenges stemming from the customs and migration effects of the Transnistrian region. An important part of Moldovan population is getting the citizenship of neighboring EU Member States, which most Moldovans are eligible for. Many more are applying to speed their access to free travel in the EU.

Liberalization of short-term travel for Moldovans will be the one most effective Europeanization process. It would intensify people-to-people contacts, increase mobility and participation in narrow and specialized events of civil society, business and academia, will ease business contacts, as well as it would boost cooperation of all kinds between people and societies. That means a higher motivation produced Moldovan citizens to take part in European educational and mobility projects, being related to pulling effects of the European integration as such. A larger access to events carried out in Europe will step up the transfer of knowledge and ideas, and at the returning they can play a significant role in transferring European values (such as European diversity and multiculturalism) and boosting the creativity and innovation in Moldova. Additionally, visa liberalization will reintegrate migration-afflicted families, as many Moldovan citizens are in the EU. Moreover, liberalized travel to the EU will raise the value of the Moldovan citizenship and attractiveness of Moldova as a country, including Transnistrian region, which may stimulate the people from Transnistrian region to affiliate more with the Moldovan state.

Liberalization of Moldovans's travel to the EU looks to be inevitable in the medium and long run, but its need is dictated by immediate circumstances. In 2014, Moldova will be facing a new round of parliamentary elections, during which the main choice will be between the pro-European integration and pro-Eurasian political forces. The pro-Eurasian proponents will have strong incentives backing their option: secure and cheap energy, access to export towards unpretentious consumer markets, stability and economic predictability for half of Moldovan migrant workers and therefore, for many of Moldovan households. These benefits are available immediately. Neither profound social and economic changes, nor costly reforms are required. The pro-European political actors will have at their backing the promise of prosperity, free travel to the EU and accountable governments, in the future. The 2014 election exercise will be crucial and there is a need for a credible incentive for the Moldovan people to stay steadily on the European course. Visa liberalization, a specific, or setting of a clear date or policy requirement would be the tangible incentive for further European integration. That has to be paired with enhanced openness and transparency from both the Moldovan authorities and the European Union in communicating with the society on the progress and outcomes of the association negotiations and of the clear benefits to the society at large.

Taking the opportunity of hosting the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum in Chisinau, the National Platform of the Republic of Moldova thus calls upon European Union to:

- consider a clear timetable for visa liberalization for Moldovan citizens before elections in Moldova in 2014;
- ensure the transparency of the provisions of the Association Agreement and the documents establishing the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area;

- foster public debate and inform, even unilaterally, the society at large, on the results of the negotiations on the provisions establishing the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area and the reforms needed for implementing DCFTA;
- to develop more specific project within the Mobility Partnership dedicated to academic mobility across EU's member states;
- to create additional media tools for promoting the existing academic programmes that are open to Moldovan citizens (FP7, ERASMUS for all, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, CEEPUS III);
- to create support creation of more consistent rules for EaP citizens coming to the EU for studies, scientific researches and other exchanges.

upon the political and governmental authorities of the Republic of Moldova:

- consolidate the political consensus around European integration. Refrain from political actions that creates opportunities for ridiculing the pro-European integration leadership and thus the whole European integration process of Moldova;
- refrain from actions that hamper the consolidation of rule of law, justice and law enforcement reform;
- negotiate with the EU and insist on exact milestones and deadlines for visa liberalization process;
- implement all necessary political conditionality requirements and technical regulations required within the visa liberalization process;
- Promoting through public informative campaigns the advantages of the new amendments to the visa facilitation regime, with common efforts of youth NGOs, state institutions and EU's representation in Moldova.
- ensure the transparency of the result of negotiations and provisions related to the establishment of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area;
- involve civil society and stakeholders from business sector and academia in formulating, implementing and monitoring the implementation of the provisions regarding the DCFTA, based on the Law on Transparency of the Process of Decision-Making no. 239 of 13.11.2008, requiring pro-active public consultation of government acts and decisions;
- consequently explore realistic possibilities for integrating the Transnistrian region in the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area of EU and Moldova and extend the visa liberalization benefits to inhabitants in the Transnistrian region, equal to those from the right bank Moldova.

upon the international community:

- support the sovereign decisions of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia to associate with the European Union and create Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas;
- show solidarity with the society of Armenia and support the Government of Armenia before pressures of any kind regarding its association with the European Union.