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Martin Schulz, President, European Parliament

Heads of State and Government, EU Member States

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Statement of the Steering Committee on Visa Liberalisation for Georgia and Ukraine

The Steering Committee (SC) of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) strongly supports calls by the Visa-free Europe Coalition and the EaP CSF visa sub-group for a speedy conclusion of the visa liberalisation process by the European Union in respect of Georgia and Ukraine. The SC urges the forthcoming Eastern Partnership summit in Riga to offer a visa-free regime to these countries from 1 January 2016

A visa-free regime will facilitate travel to the EU for citizens of these two countries enabling them to see for themselves the false nature of anti-EU propaganda and to enhance business ties with the EU. Visa liberalisation is the most visible sign of European integration for Georgia and Ukraine. It will also be a tangible success for the Eastern Partnership and an important argument for these countries to stay on the pro-European path.

In order to be granted a visa-free regime, both Georgia and Ukraine, like Moldova for which visa liberalisation was approved earlier, have had to implement a number of systemic reforms, making their countries safer, better governed and closer to the EU in many areas. Measures for tackling corruption, discrimination, trafficking in human beings have been introduced. Most importantly, modern and efficient border and migration management systems have been established, reducing the risk of illegal migration from Georgia and Ukraine. Both countries have fulfilled most of their obligations under visa liberalisation action plans and are ready for the lifting of visa requirements.

The armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine should not be considered an obstacle as the reforms already put in place by Ukraine contributed to the resolution of many security issues. Visa liberalisation will build support in break-away regions for the re-establishment of links with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

In addition, the example of Moldova, which implemented similar reforms and whose citizens have been enjoying visa-free travel since 28 April 2014 demonstrated that visa liberalisation in no way exacerbates migration risks.

The Steering Committee calls on the authorities and independent civil society organisations in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus to work for the implementation of systemic justice and human rights reforms in order to facilitate the visa liberalisation process for their citizens.

It is time for the EU to act and express its solidarity with Georgia and Ukraine against pressure from Russia, by waiving visa requirements for them. The necessary legal procedures should be accelerated and the respective decisions should be adopted at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga, followed by the vote of the European Parliament and Council of the European Union at the earliest possible opportunity.