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*Coordination Committee of the National Platform
of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum*

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***How to increase the transformational potential of the European Dialogue on
Modernisation with Belarusian society?***

position paper

We, representatives of civil society in Belarus, the members of the Coordination Committee of the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, with this document express our position on the current status, problems and prospects of the European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarusian society. Reaffirming our full support for the Dialogue, we draw attention of all the participants to the need to make changes in precedence rules in future and in the organization structure of the European Dialogue on Modernisation. Along with the obvious achievements, we see the dangerous trends: formalization of the Dialogue events at the EU level, low level of involvement of Belarusian public stakeholders in the Dialogue process, limited potential of the expert groups for the development of detailed plans for the reforms. These and other difficulties can significantly limit the transformational potential of the initiative. We believe that our recommendations will contribute to eliminating the denoted negative trends and to strengthening the European Dialogue on Modernisation as an instrument of positive transformation of the Belarusian society and constructive development of Belarusian-European relations.

SUMMARY OF THE EUROPEAN DIALOGUE ON MODERNISATION DEVELOPMENT

A year has passed since the announcement of the Dialogue. During this time, four expert working groups of the Dialogue¹ have been formed, as well as the coordination group out of coordinators of the expert groups and representatives of the EU member states' embassies. The experts have defined the thematic priorities of the modernisation reforms and the plans for the future work related to their preparation (mainly in the form of seminars and conferences). Several joint meetings of the expert groups, political parties, Belarusian civil society organisations, and European diplomats have been held in Belarus on the issues of the Dialogue actual development, being however organized under a different framework with a different composition of the participants. Thematic events have been held in a number of the EU member states, hosted by the European Dialogue on Modernisation. Out of these, the Seminar on Privatization (Warsaw, April 2012) and the Conference on the possibility of reforms in social welfare and housing and municipal policy (Berlin, February 2013) should be specially noted.

At the moment, the Belarusian authorities do not officially participate in the European Dialogue on Modernisation. In some cases, certain government experts may participate in the Dialogue activities, having only a non-formal and non-official nature. In February 2013 the Belarusian authorities sent the proposals to the member states on the new format of the Dialogue on Modernisation, which would be limited to interstate relations without the political opposition and civil society engagement. It is important to mention that these proposals by the Belarusian authorities are not accompanied with demonstration of their good will to cooperate with the EU. Authorities have never released 11 political prisoners, including human rights defender Ales Bialiatski, despite the fact that this step is necessary to start any negotiations process. Paradoxically, but the activity of Belarusian opposition political parties and movements in the Dialogue is minimized as well, and limited to participation in individual meetings organized by the EU Delegation in Minsk, seminars and conferences in the EU. At the same time, the participation of civil society was much more active and constant in the course of the year at the level of expert work, and the level of organization of special public events.

Belarusian society awareness about the European Dialogue on Modernisation, according to public opinion polls, is as high as 25%, of which 48% respondents believe that this program is essential for Belarus². In a closed information space of Belarus, these results can be considered satisfactory, largely made possible through the strong support of the Dialogue by most independent media.

The overall coordination of the European Dialogue on Modernisation' (DoM) work in Belarus is done by the EU Delegation in Minsk and the coordination group of the Belarusian experts.

The last phase of the Dialogue can be described as preliminary one; it was limited to communication between actual and potential participants of the DoM and draft plans for future work on the preparation of modernisation reforms.

PROBLEMS AND OBSTACLES OF THE EUROPEAN DIALOGUE ON MODERNISATION

The DoM progress faces several groups of difficulties and problems, mostly generated by the internal situation in Belarus. In particular, we see significant obstacles at the level of strategy and concept of the

¹ The groups: 1) political dialogue and political reforms; 2) legal reform and internal affairs; 3) economic and social reforms, and 4) trade and regulatory reforms.

² Results of the IISEPS polls in December 2012: <http://www.iiseps.org/press8.html>

DoM, communication and relationships between stakeholders, qualification of participants of the conversation.

- **1. Strategic uncertainty.** Purpose and concept of the Dialogue, even a year after its launch seem rather vague. There is no distinctive, officially fixed DoM development strategy with the definition of the objectives, principles, sequence of stages and the planned results. The DoM lacks clear management structure, a clear distribution of responsibility, etc. The general development of the Dialogue reminds incremental progress at varying purposes and actions depending on the situation. On the one hand, this allows being flexible and responding quickly to situation changes. On the other hand, such state of affairs creates chaos, and often the visibility of dynamics without any possibility of telling whether the Dialogue is in progress or does it stand still. Absence of strategic clarity and clear inclusion rules of the Dialogue makes it difficult even for the EU members to contribute if they wanted to promote the Dialogue. Most part of the events organized by member countries pass without any impact for Belarus; these are not consistent with the development of the Dialogue inside Belarus and are not coordinated with the Coordination Group of the Dialogue.
- **2. Absence of the subject of communication in the DoM from the Belarusian side.** In a situation of inconsistency of positions and contradiction between all the stakeholders of the Dialogue, a place for the subject of communication on the part of Belarus remains in fact unoccupied. The state refuses to be engaged in the Dialogue on the proposed by the EU basis; the political opposition rhetorically agrees, but does not de facto participate; civil society could become this subject, but it is not recognized as such by either party and is represented by numerous organizations with different interests. The problem of the diversity of opinions within the civil society in Belarus is partially waived by the presence of the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum as a platform for the coordination of interests, able to speak "with one voice". But at the same time it lacks the formal recognition by other entities, including the EU and the Belarusian political opposition. The absence of Belarusian partner in the Dialogue puts the EU in a rather strange situation when the dialogue seems to be there, while the partner for communication is absent. This, in particular, leads to the fact that the EU (in particular, the EU Delegation in Belarus) unilaterally takes control of the whole process, from setting the goals to the results' acceptance.
- **3. Weak engagement of public stakeholders in the DoM.** The DoM has been designed, among other, to promote the vision of modern and democratic Belarus among the general public, ie to create a clear alternative to the country's development. This task can be performed in case the Dialogue engages a wide range of stakeholders: NGOs, trade unions, employers' associations, religious organizations, local communities, etc. Their role, on the one hand, is in ordering and setting goals for the reforms, and on the other - in their promotion in the society. We believe that only such a broad involvement of many public entities will be able to influence the change of the government's position on the Dialogue. The civil society also plays a critical role in the process of the reforms' implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the reforms' process and dissemination of the modernisation ideas in wider society.
- **4. The problem of competence.** This problem occurs as a consequence of the previous two. Due to the absence of the upper levels of goal setting, the expert groups are a) left to their own resources and work without the order from the Belarusian public stakeholders. Besides, b) the composition of the DoM working groups includes representatives of political structures, civil

society stakeholders, representatives of target groups organizations (grassroot organizations) and properly, professional experts and specialists. Such a motley and mixed composition is certainly not adapted to the needs and procedure of the organization of normal expert work on reforms' preparation. People with different skills, different experiences, different ideological, political, and personal settings have turned out to be in the group's composition. All this makes the expert groups a little capable of deep and substantial work.

- **5. Non-participation of the state.** Lack of involvement in the Dialogue of the Belarusian state creates the most serious problems with the implementation of any project of modernisation reforms. High level participation of the authorities is not possible until they do not release and rehabilitate political prisoners. Still, certainly, the state participation, even at the technical level of officials and government experts would make progress in the Dialogue. The main obstacle to the participation of the state is the need to sit at the same table with representatives of the opposition and civil society (the "syndrome of civil society"). The Belarusian authorities are unwilling to even implicitly recognize the legitimacy and subjectness of the civil society and political opposition, through entering into dialogue with them.

MODERNISATION OR DIALOGUE?

The Belarusian MFA proposals to change the format of the dialogue have been intensified both in the EU and Belarus debates on the reorganization of the European Dialogue on Modernisation. A number of Belarusian analysts have proposed to divide the Dialogue into two parallel tracks that will allow achieving a real involvement of the state and progress of reforms: one for the EU-state relations, the other - to continue the dialogue between the EU and civil society (analogue to the initiative of the EU-Russia "Partnership for Modernisation").

We believe that both the unconditional acceptance of the proposals of the Belarusian state and proposals of division of the Dialogue into two parallel tracks have significant threats. In our opinion, the creation of separate relationships of the EU with the state would de facto mean the exclusion of civil society from the real modernisation process. Since there is no freedom for the civil society activity in the country, it cannot function to influence the government decisions and monitor the government activities without a special dialogue format. This gives the state the ability to easily simulate the process of reforms without real reforms. We, in particular, believe that the exclusion of the public entities of the implementation of the reforms of higher education leads to the emasculation of the actual content of the reforms, elimination of value aspects, neglecting academic self-governance and the quality of education, etc. Such a reform, in fact, would become an empty change of the shape and fitting of the education system under the external semblance of compliance with the Bologna process.

At the same time, we recognize that under the elimination of the "syndrome of civil society", full inclusion of the state will provide an opportunity for progress in some sectoral reforms (foreign investment regulation, modernisation of enterprises, energy efficiency, improving the regulation of trade, infrastructure development, etc.) which the Belarusian authorities are interested in. This way of authoritarian modernisation can contribute to economic stability, growth of the welfare of the population, and even to some liberalization of civil society organizations' activity in areas where this activity compensate the lack of public resources (alternative social assistance, providing specific services and expertise, etc.). Herewith, we believe that in this case all the recent achievements of the active part of civil society will be lost, including the progress made in the framework of the Eastern Partnership.

Loss of space and possibilities of real impact on decision-making processes essential for the country, will lead to complete degeneration of civic activity at the national policy level. This will prevent the possibility for normal growth and formation of the democratic alternative to the current authoritarian system in the Belarusian society and delay democratic reforms for decades.

Traditionally, the way of authoritarian modernisation is opposed to the democratic modernisation. And in fact, in both cases modernisation is done from one single center of power, but the democratic transformation involves replacement of authoritarian elite supporters by ones of democratic change. For many reasons, such a opposition is inadequate to the Belarusian situation where there is conflicting balance between supporters of authoritarian and democratic tracks of development. The dividing line runs through all social strata, from the political and cultural elites to ordinary citizens. **The opposition to the authoritarian way of modernisation is the strategy of conventional (contractual) modernisation**, where transformations may be the result of social conventions on the reforms between the two alternative parts of society. The European Dialogue on Modernisation in this case may be a means to a social and political consensus of many stakeholders (multi-stakeholder dialogue).

This course of development of the European Dialogue on Modernisation is more technically complex, requires more tension of intellectual resources, efforts of all the participants, and is less predictable in the results. It certainly looks less secure, less certain and more resource-intensive than the track of the authoritarian modernisation. But the choice in its favor is possible, and this possibility arises only when having a firm focus on progress towards democratic change in Belarus, even in understanding of the complexity of the chosen path. Only based on value and ethical framework under which the price of preserving and prolongation of the life of authoritarianism is too high, we tend to conventional modernisation track.

WAYS AND DIRECTIONS OF ENHANCING THE DIALOGUE ON MODERNISATION

Ways to improve the DoM lie in the direction of **intensifying the involvement of the various stakeholders into the process of the Dialogue**. To address this issue, the following steps should be taken:

1. At the level of the EU member states

- to express publicly the position of the member states on the development of the European Dialogue on Modernisation, where, in particular, to emphasize the immutability of the composition of stakeholders' dialogue (presence of state, political opposition and civil society) and the need to involve different types of public stakeholders in the Dialogue;
- to include in the consultations on the Dialogue the structures that really deal with the promotion and development of the Dialogue. In particular, the coordinators of the working groups of the European Dialogue on Modernisation, the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, expert centers and think tanks involved in the preparation of reforms.

2. At the level of the European External Action Service and the European Commission

- to organize broad public consultations with civil society of Belarus to evaluate the development of the European Dialogue on Modernisation and the ways of its intensification. The consultation mechanism may be a public offer to all interested organizations to express their views on the issues of the Dialogue

development, the role and participation of civil society, the issues of the state involvement, the role and potential contribution of the European Union. Following the consultations, to accept the Concept of European Dialogue on Modernisation (jointly with the Coordination Group);

- at the level of the concept and development strategy of the DoM, to form two different in type spaces for communication of the subjects involved: in particular, it is necessary to supplement the already existing format of expert working groups by the new format for stakeholder communication in the DoM. In particular, it can be done through the inclusion of key stakeholders in the Coordination Group of the DoM;
- to consider the issue of targeted funding for the preparation of the modernisation reforms' program, which would include case studies, monitoring, temporary expert groups' work, public events, study visits and internships.

3. At the level of the governance structure of the European Dialogue on Modernisation (the EU Delegation in Minsk and the coordinators of the working groups)

- to arrange consultations of the coordinators of the groups of the Dialogue on Modernisation with the main public stakeholders and leaders of major social and political structures of Belarus (the National Platform of the EaP CSF, political parties, trade unions, employers' associations, religious groups, and other important socio-political organisations);
- after the consultations, to extend the composition of the DoM Coordination Group through the co-option of the concerned public stakeholders;
- to create special temporary teams of experts by contract basis, in terms of their qualifications and professionalism. These teams will be responsible for preparation of programs of detailed reforms and production of related research and monitoring.

Through implementing the above steps, Belarusian stakeholders will have the opportunity to take adequate functional place in the DoM, as well as **to initiate a series of actions and activities under the "program support" of the DoM**. These events can make the concept and the meaning of the DoM more accessible to the general Belarusian citizens, and provide a meaningful communication between the various parties on the sites and in the environment that are not formally part of the overall composition of the European Dialogue on Modernisation.

We express our commitment to a more detailed explanation of our position and specific proposals in the dialogue with representatives of the European Commission, the EU member states and all Belarusian stakeholders in order to introduce the required changes in the DoM and to give the Dialogue a new dynamics, allowing to reach the goals and objectives set before the initiative.

Signatures:

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Andrei Yahorau, Director of the Centre for European Transformation (the author of the first draft of the text), Coordinator of the 1st Working Group of the DoM

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