



Stefan Fule,

European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eastern Partnership countries

Tbilisi , 12 February 2012

Dear Commissioner, Dear Ministers,

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP-CSF) thank you very much for the invitation and opportunity to report on our situation and present our point of view on certain matters pertaining to the Eastern Partnership.

You will be pleased to hear that thanks to the support of the Civil Society Facility and the personal interest of Commissioner Fule, for which we are especially grateful, it has now been possible to establish the rudiments of an organizational structure which I can assure you will serve the aims of the Eastern Partnership well. We see the EaP as a transitory arrangement which should lead to the establishment of the rule of law, a functioning market economy as well as fully functioning democracies in the partner countries. The end is however not yet in sight and we have a lot to do.

The CSF is unique in that it is a diverse alliance of non-governmental organizations from the EaP countries and their supporters in the member states. It is held together by a common mission. That is to monitor, advise and advocate solutions about issues raised by the EaP process. It is especially valuable that the CSF has participant status in the EaP governmental platforms and ministerial meetings. This provides the means for a two way exchange of opinions between the government and the non-governmental level.

We are keen that this exchange of views should be replicated at the national level in the partner countries where our National Platforms can meet with their government officials as well as with EU officials and local parliamentarians. Already last July our

representatives suggested in Brussels the establishment of trilateral fora for regular consultations. Such consultations, I note, are envisaged in Association Agreements now under negotiation and it would enhance the credibility of the negotiating partners if such a mechanism were implemented straight away.

However, certain conditions have to be met for monitoring, consultation and advocacy to work properly. It is essential that civil society organizations be genuinely independent. This is a principle which the CSF is determined to defend. We are dismayed to hear that legislation currently being discussed in the Azerbaijani parliament aims to prevent the independent operation of NGOs. In Armenia ideas are also being suggested which would bring NGOs under greater official control.

Independent civil society organizations can provide an authentic, alternative voice on the subject of reform. And please always remember that we in the CSF are concerned to play a constructive role in the EaP process. Indeed wherever and whenever, they show a genuine desire to reform and modernize their countries in the spirit of the aims of the EaP, governments can rely on our support,

However, this can only happen where there is progress towards free and fair elections, a free media and corruption is the exception and not the norm. This is why we have identified election monitoring, media freedom and the fight against corruption as three 'flagship' issues for the CSF. This week, a CSF task force will be in Armenia to monitor the presidential election alongside local CSF NGOs. We are planning similar missions in Georgia and Azerbaijan in elections in October. Free elections are the corner stone of the reform process as they legitimise legislation. A law passed by fraudulently elected deputies has low credibility in the eyes of the voters and foreign partners as well as investors.

Last month, the Steering Committee called on the Azerbaijani authorities to engage in a dialogue with the opposition and civil society in the wake of unrest in Ismayilli which was prompted by popular anger at signs of corruption. Unfortunately there has been little response. Indeed, a week later peaceful demonstrators in Baku were detained and fined heavily while most recently Tofiq Yagublu, a newspaper columnist and one of the leaders of the Musavat party was detained. Ilgar Mammadov, the head of the Baku political studies school, was also detained on charges of inciting unrest in Ismayilli. Both could face prison sentences.

In the view of the Steering Committee there should not be any political prisoners or victims of 'selective justice' ( a euphemism for Yulia Timoshenko and Yuri Lutsenko) in the partner countries. These include Ales Byalyatski and his colleagues in Belarus. The Steering Committee calls for the release of all political prisoners in the EaP. The countries of the EaP do have legitimate security concerns but can these really be effectively addressed by imprisoning bloggers?

The CSF is heavily engaged in monitoring and advocacy in areas such as visa liberalisation where Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have begun the visa liberalisation dialogue with the EU and Moldova and Ukraine have been granted Action Plans and Georgia is expected to follow soon. Visa liberalization for EaP citizens is an absolutely crucial factor in the whole process and a major factor driving change.

Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreements (DCFTAs) are also of great interest to us. We note that last week's European Council called for progress on Association Agreements with the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Armenia. The Council hints that these could be finalized by the time of the EaP summit in Vilnius in November. At the same time the Council states in its conclusions on the EU budget for 2014 to 2020 that 'support to partners will be adapted to the development situation and progress with regard to human rights, democracy, the rule of law and good governance'. This makes monitoring of the situation in the EaP countries which the CSF is undertaking all the more relevant.

The CSF is preparing to monitor the implementation of the EaP roadmap and make suggestions for the way forward after the Vilnius Summit in November. Here we will be urging, among others, that environmental issues gain more prominence than hitherto in the next road map and attract more attention than before at the Summit itself. The CSF will also be producing the European Integration Index. An Energy Index is also planned.

This autumn the annual Civil Society Forum will take place in Chisinau, the Moldovan capital. We will be happy to welcome high level representatives of the six EaP countries as well as Commissioner Füle. We look forward to seeing you there.

Thank you for your attention