

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: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine.

With the deaths of hundreds of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians in the past couple 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. 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.**

**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 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 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;
- **enhance the level of integration of Eastern Partner governments into the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CDSP)**, 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;
- **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.

Thank you for your attention.