



Yerevan 13 September 2013

Stefan Füle, European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy,
Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Eastern Partnership countries,

Dear Commissioner, Dear Ministers,

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

We are all aware that we are meeting at an important time for the Partnership. The Vilnius summit will take place at the end of November this year and the Civil Society Forum will be holding its fifth annual meeting in Chisinau at the beginning of next month. Progress in the Eastern Partnership will be assessed at both meetings in an atmosphere of some uncertainty.

Even a few weeks ago it seemed that Association Agreements would be initialed with three of the Partnership states in Vilnius and attention was concentrated on the chances of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine being signed. But the future of the Partnership seems less clear with the sudden decision by Serj Sargasyan, President of the Republic of Armenia, to join the Russian sponsored Customs Union and constant political and economic pressure by Moscow on EaP states to abandon their pro European policies. This pressure was criticized yesterday by the European Parliament which called on the Russian Federation “to refrain from exerting more pressure on the Eastern partners and to respect fully their sovereign right to pursue their own political choices”.

The Eastern Partnership was designed to further the rule of law, build market economies as well as fully functioning democracies in the partner countries. We see the role of our non-governmental organizations as providing an authentic and alternative voice on the subject of these reforms including education, which is the subject of this informal meeting, and is an important component as it has the power to change the way societies think and behave.

The CSF Steering Committee stated at a similar ministerial meeting in Tbilisi last February that governments can rely on our support, wherever and whenever, they show a genuine desire to reform and modernise their countries.

The Steering Committee has stated that it supports the position of its Ukrainian national platform which supports the signing of the Association Agreement thus giving Ukraine a framework for reform and placing it on the path of European integration.

Georgia and Moldova appear to be on track for the initialing of their Association Agreements with the government of Georgia preparing an action plan together with the Georgian national platform to support the changes which will be required. Georgia will be holding a presidential election next month which we trust will be free and fair thus putting this country in the forefront of the Eastern Partner states. Moldova appears to be determined to push ahead with reforms before next year's elections to get as much done as possible in case there is a change of government. Moldova of course, is hosting the Civil Society Forum next month and we are grateful to the government for its support.

We look to the government of Belarus to free its political prisoners and start a constructive relationship with the Belarusian national platform on the EU's modernization initiative. Early next month will see presidential elections in Azerbaijan which will be observed by local and international monitors. This we hope will provide a fair assessment of the way the election is conducted by the authorities. Here too we hope that political prisoners are released and human rights are respected in full.

It is worth spending a little time on the situation in Armenia as it is a model case of what can go wrong as soon as there is weakening of a country's commitment to reforms. Last July, the Armenian National Platform of the CSF (ANP-CSF) expressed its support for the signing of the Association Agreement as "a step serving the common interests of the Armenian state and society". The ANP-

CSF expressed “its readiness to engage in dialogue and cooperation with all stakeholders and the general public toward enhancing effective participation of Armenia in the EaP and the AA processes...”

This offer now appears redundant in the light of the President’s decision. And instead of being involved in a process of ‘dialogue and consultation’ the ANP-CSF came under physical attack when two of its members Haykak Arshamyan, from the Yerevan Press Club (YPC) and Suren Saghatelyan, from Transparency International-Anticorruption Center Armenia (TI Armenia) were beaten on September 5 by a group of ‘unknown assailants’ as they returned from a demonstration in support of the Armenia-EU integration process.

It can be assumed this was no random attack by a gang of hooligans. The victims were targeted because of who they were and because of the civil society activities they were engaged in.

The Yerevan Press Club, where Mr Arshamyan is a project coordinator, is at the centre of the ANP-CSF. It specializes in defending media freedom which is one of the CSF flagship initiatives. Mr Saghatelyan is a board member of TI Armenia which is part of a global network devoted to fighting corruption, another CSF flagship topic.

The YPC and TI-Armenia were also heavily involved in election monitoring in the elections in 2012 and 2013. Election monitoring is another flagship issue for the CSF and we will be watching the forthcoming presidential elections in Azerbaijan and Georgia carefully for signs of malpractice.

The aim of the attack was to signal to our colleagues that they should tone down their activities in these CSF areas which are crucial to the success of reforms. Free and fair elections give legitimacy to the policies and legislation which underpin reforms, corruption is a canker which threatens the development of societies and an independent media facilitates a dialogue between rulers and ruled and open debate on policy options as well as exposing misdoing.

There have been reports of attacks by ‘unknown assailants’ as well as intimidation by police officers of civic activists who have been protesting about transportation price rises. All of these incidents are the subject of an appeal by Armenian NGOs to the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights to intervene

and persuade the authorities to put an end to these incidents and to catch and punish the perpetrators. The CSF supports this appeal.

On September 19, at its general meeting, the ANP CSF will present its statement concerning all the issues above and the general evaluation of Armenia's unsuccessful path towards AA and the expected future.

We wish Commissioner Stefan Füle, the European Commission and European External Action Service every success in their efforts to defend the Eastern Partnership against its enemies and to keep the policy on track in Armenia and elsewhere. There is much more at stake than just signing free trade agreements. It is about building stable societies in which everyone feels they have a stake in their future and which are ruled through a process of dialogue and debate rather than the power of the fist. It is about the long term security of the societies which have emerged from the Soviet Union and which have earned the right to a happy future. The CSF, which now has an institutional base thanks to its secretariat in Brussels remains firmly committed to the programme of the Partnership. We are continuing with monitoring reforms and advocacy for them as well as support for the Eastern Partnership. Our secretariat in Brussels is working well. However, the latest violent incidents in Armenia show what happens when countries turn away from the EaP. This is the strongest argument for continued support for the EaP by EU member states and people of good will in the Partnership countries.

Thank you for your attention*

*Speech delivered by Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan on behalf of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP-CSF)