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УСХОДНЯГА ПАРТНЁРСТВА

*To the Steering Committee of the EaP CSF
From the Belarusian National Platform of the EaP Civil Society Forum*

Comments on the Strategy of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum for 2014-2016

We, the participants of the Belarusian National Platform of the EaP CSF, welcome the efforts of the EAP CSF Steering Committee aimed at the development of the CSF Strategy for 2014-2016. The Strategy development is relevant for the coming time period due to perspective expiration of certain provisions of the Concept Paper of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum relating to the plans for 2012-2014. Thus, it makes sense to adopt new Strategy of the Forum at the sixth EaP CSF meeting in Tbilisi in 2014.

At large, we are positive about the trend and spirit of the proposed Strategy; but a number of points raises questions, and in some cases requires substantial processing.

Firstly, the proposed Strategy focuses on 2012-2014, but in some cases it is at odds with the general provisions of the Concept Paper of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, approved by the third annual EaP CSF meeting in Poznan (November 2011). In this case, the ratio of the Concept Paper of 2012-2014 and the Strategy 2014-2016 remains unclear; in particular, we ask the Steering Committee to explain:

- a) Does the text of the Strategy replace the text of the Concept Paper, or does it only complement it with the provisions regarding the new period of development for the years 2014-2016?
- b) The reasons for and arguments against each of the changes in the provisions of the Concept Paper, including the exclusion of certain sections (Resources and Funding, Services, descriptions of some of the structural elements of the CSF) and points (for example, the loss of one of the points of the Forum's objectives of "supporting choice of the roadmap on the democratic transformation in the partner countries").

Secondly, in comparison with the Concept Paper, the Strategy changes the wording of the Forum's mission. More specifically, the wording of mission in the Concept is:

"To facilitate and strengthen the active and expert engagement of civil society in the Eastern Partnership and in the eastern dimension of EU external relations policies, and in participatory governance and accountable policymaking with regard to the democratic transition and European integration of the Eastern Partnership countries, including the prospect of EU membership.

has been changed to:

"The mission of the EaP CSF is the growth of accountable and inclusive policy development process in the countries of the Eastern Partnership, as well as the promotion of democratic transition and European integration of the EaP countries with the EU through the expert inclusion of civil society, based on the values as an accepted and respected stakeholder in the political debate and the political decision-making process".

While maintaining the overall canvas of the mission, it rather emphasizes the "expert participation" of civil society that is not entirely consistent with the spirit of the broad interpretation of the civil society involvement in the political decision-making process. In general, from our point of view, compared with the Concept Paper, the Strategy makes exclusive emphasis on the expert participation in some cases, which unreasonably narrows the functions of the Forum and its structural elements.

Thirdly, there are clearly two points missing in the description of the context: 1) Overview of the objectives and tasks of the previous Concept Paper, 2) Assessment of the status and development of civil society in the partner countries. In addition, from our point of view, the assessment of the development of the Eastern Partnership is also given somewhat vague, which it is possibly due to the uncertainty of the situation on the eve of the Summit in Vilnius. However, the general development of the Eastern Partnership should be evaluated more specifically, perhaps in the light of monitoring the implementation of the Eastern Partnership road maps.

Fourthly, the descriptions of the external and internal challenges often lack clear arguments and reasons for the various allegations. In particular, it is not clear

a) What is the basis for the statements on "reducing the interest and support of the EU member countries towards the Eastern Partnership";

b) Highlighting the problems of organizational development of the Forum includes critical assessments regarding the development of the CSF "as an organization". At the same time, the Forum is not an organization in the true sense of the word, and can be regarded as a "platform" to a greater extent, a "communication site", or a "parliament" for civil society organizations. This option not less requires the Forum to be a permanent structure, not just an annual event. At the same time, the autonomy of National Platforms is not a flaw here; it rather enhances the legitimacy of the Forum. The Forum and its other structural elements have to be tightly linked with National Platforms, and vice versa, National Platforms should closely cooperate with the structural elements of the Forum.

c) It is not clear what is the basis for the statements on the lack of "inclusiveness of National Platforms" and "privatization of the Forum's success by its individual members". We would like to understand more specifically what practices are referred to above and regarding what platforms exactly;

d) The provisions of the differences of objectives and interests of the participants of the Forum carry clear message, but the described differences do not exhaust all their diversity. For example, the work at the level of policy for civil society includes not only monitoring and control

functions, but also participating in the formulation of policies at the national and international levels, advocacy campaigns, etc. These differences in the "extensive" and "narrow" interpretation of both the actions of civil society, and the Forum have also become the subject of controversy.

Fifthly, in Section 4. Exploiting the strengths and addressing the challenges, we fully share the approach to external challenges, attitudes and objectives of the Forum, however, we note the lack of guidance on specific mechanisms and actions to address these problems (supporting EaP issues in the EU agenda, increasing the participation of civil society in decision-making processes in partner countries, and so on);

Sixthly, regarding the internal objectives and plans, we:

a) Support the idea of establishment of the Advisory Board. Herewith, we express concerns about the transfer of the functions of the Forum and its Secretariat to the Advisory Board. In our view, decisions of the Advisory Board may have no more than a recommendation character, while the Steering Committee should be aware of all the actions of the Advisory Board on lobbying and advocating the interests of the CSF. The idea to include important public figures in the Advisory Board is good; however, we emphasize the need to include representatives of expert community in this Board, who would deal with the issues of the Eastern Partnership and the EU Eastern policy, as well as the need to include representatives from the Eastern Partnership countries. The potential of the former chairpersons and active members of the CSF Steering Committee can also be exploited by the Advisory Board;

b) Consider the idea to eliminate the positions of the three EU coordinators in the Steering Committee of the Forum premature and not well-founded. Furthermore, there is a need to ensure formation and launch of the European platform of civil society organizations in the coming year as lacking structure in the composition of the EaP Civil Society Forum, able to provide regular and intensive communication between CSOs of the EU on the current agenda, coordinating their actions in period between meetings of the Forum and its Working Groups.

c) Consider it appropriate and propose to the CSF Steering Committee to review and analyze possible alternative to the transition from a one-year life cycle of the EaP Civil Society Forum to the two-year cycle. In this case elections to the Steering Committee could be organized every second year for a term of 2 years, and every second meeting of the Forum would be organized in a fundamentally different way than it is now, which would allocate more space for thematic discussions and the sub-groups' work.

Seventhly, in defining the short-term objectives of the Strategy for 2014:

a) We note the importance of participation of National Platforms in the process (as already provided by the Strategy). We pay attention to the necessity of keeping autonomy and self-governance of National Platforms in choosing activity format, means of managing and structuring this activity, determination of membership and elected bodies within the platforms. In this connection, we draw attention to the fact that the priorities of the Belarusian National Platform are defined by the Concept of its development up to 2014 and its periodic conferences.

b) We believe that as strengthening civil society participation is achieved not only through "expertise and project activities", recommend to include provisions regarding advocacy

campaigns, participation of National Platforms in trilateral dialogue, etc. in the description of the short-term goals.

c) We note the need to increase the participation of civil society in the development and implementation of all EU programs affecting the interests of the partner countries and their civil society, not only cross-border cooperation programs for 2014-2020.

Eighthly, we believe that the framing of the short-term and medium-term objectives of the Strategy by the description of the expected results and indicators of their achievement will help dealing in a more responsible way both with their formulation and implementation by the Forum.