

The Speech of the Co-Chairs of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, Krzysztof Bobinski and Boris Navasardyan, delivered at the EU and Eastern Partnership Foreign Ministers Meeting on the 22nd of July in Brussels

Dear High Representative, Dear Commissioner, Dear Ministers,

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum wishes to recognise the work that has been done by all those involved in the Eastern Partnership since it began in 2009. We want to affirm our support for the EaP. We appreciate the European Union's efforts in creating a favourable environment for civil society in partner countries. The European Neighbourhood Policy package published earlier this year stated anew that a strong partnership with civil society is, and will continue to remain, central to the EU's Neighbourhood policy. As civil society organisations are the main drivers of democratic reforms and hold governments accountable to their promises.

We would like to commend the work done by Commissioner Štefan Füle to realise these hopes. He has to struggle to explain the merits of the Eastern Partnership to his colleagues inside the EU, and to face people in the partner countries who see no need for change or look to other states to support their aspirations. And we want to thank both him and Catherine Ashton, the High Representative, for their commitment to human rights in the region and for the fact that they have spoken up whenever these rights have been broken.

We look forward to the Vilnius Eastern Partnership summit and encourage all the EU member states as well as the partner countries to send their highest possible representation to a meeting which will mark a turning point for the Eastern Partnership.

The Civil Society Forum's Ukrainian national platform and the Steering Committee of the CSF urge both the EU and Ukraine to fulfil the necessary conditions for the signature of the Association Agreement in Vilnius between both sides. Three other states, Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, are expected to initial Association Agreements including DCFTAs. This means that after Vilnius we will be monitoring the implementation of a challenging set of international treaties – the Association Agreements - which should transform these countries and deepen their integration with the EU.

Meanwhile, we have been monitoring the progress made so far in reforms through the European Integration Index research coordinated by the International Renaissance Foundation in Kiev and the EaP roadmap monitoring co-ordinated by PASOS from Prague. These studies show that only in Georgia and Moldova did government policymakers and legislatures consistently engage with civil society in the reform process. There was limited receptiveness

to such engagement in Ukraine, and we are seeing the beginnings of an open attitude in Armenia.

Only in Georgia has civil society been given a seat in regular trilateral forums - including government, the EU delegations and civil society. The EU has engaged with civil society in the partner countries, but it has been less effective in fostering a dialogue between partner governments and civil society. The preliminary results of the CSF study showed that civil society actors in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine believe the EU must do more in this respect.

The negotiation of the Association Agreements between the EU and partner governments, however, saw almost no involvement of civil society. The talks and drafting process were closed to the general public and largely to civil society both by the partner countries and the EU. This has meant that there now is a lack of awareness among society of the importance of the Association Agreements in bringing the partners closer to the values and standards promoted by the European Union and the clear benefits to their countries of closer European integration. More consultation would have built a greater understanding of the importance and relevance of the content of the Association Agreements.

Our monitoring, which will be presented in comprehensive formats prior to the EaP Vilnius summit, so far shows that first of all Moldova and Georgia, and to a certain extent Armenia, continue on a positive track of European integration. Ukraine, though enjoying the highest intensity of political dialogue with the EU, continues to slow its integration effort. Azerbaijan and Belarus show no major progress.

We note that Mr Vladimir Makei, the foreign minister of Belarus, is in the room. Hopefully the dialogue this will engender between the EU and his government will lead to the speedy release of political prisoners in Belarus as this issue and curbs on free political association remain a major obstacle to European integration.

Persistent challenges in the six partner countries have been observed by the CSF such as endemic corruption and failure to treat elections as a regular democratic procedure. In the EaP countries elections remain a dramatic event causing social tensions. The CSF pays special attention to the administration of elections in the EaP countries. The Forum stands firmly by the position that free and fair elections are needed if the reform processes in the framework of EaP are to gain popular legitimacy.

In this respect the studies mentioned concluded, that Moldova, despite positive trends in some other areas, showed deterioration in elections after uncompetitive voting for the President by the Parliament. No consultation on changes to the election law during the recent political crisis took place in the country. There is urgent need for greater plurality in media ownership and transparency of party political financing in Moldova.

The parliamentary elections in Georgia last autumn marked a greater openness to civil society engagement, despite a continued polarisation of political forces.

Although international observers reported progress in the administration of the electoral process during the cycle of three Armenian elections in 2012-2013, the public perception and trust towards the official results did not improve in the country.

In Ukraine the new law on referenda enables the government to bypass parliament to change or even cancel the constitution. The use of selective justice towards political opposition figures remains a problem, even though some prisoners have been released.

Organisations belonging to the Forum will be monitoring elections this autumn in Georgia and in Azerbaijan, and in Moldova next year. There is particular concern that repressive measures in Azerbaijan prior to October elections, including detentions of opponents of the government, such as Ilgar Mammedov, legislative initiatives affecting freedom of assembly and freedom of associations jeopardise participation in free elections. It is therefore all the more important that local observers in Azerbaijan should be able to work without hindrance and that international observers should report without bias on what they see and what they hear from reliable local sources. In this context we are dismayed to learn that the European Parliament has decided not to observe the forthcoming election in Azerbaijan.

Thank you for your attention

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