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Vice-President, European Commission,
and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, European Council
Štefan Füle, European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy
Martin Schulz, President, European Parliament
Ministers of Foreign Affairs, EU member states

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Statement of Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on repressive laws in Ukraine and Azerbaijan

EU must cease financial assistance to Ukraine government and impose sanctions on legislators that voted for dictatorial legislation.

Civil Society Forum challenges EU and Eastern Partner countries to sign a Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms.

Dear High Representative, Dear Commissioner, Dear President of the European Parliament, Dear Ministers,

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum calls upon the European Union to cease all financial assistance to the government of Ukraine, and to impose a travel ban on all 239 Ukrainian MPs who voted on 16 January 2014 for authoritarian new laws restricting the freedom of assembly, speech, and association. EU sanctions should include freezing of EU-based financial assets of the lawmakers, and should be applied also to President Viktor Yanukovich, who signed the measures into law.

The newly enacted measures in Ukraine include Soviet-style censorship and libel laws, and allow prosecutors to initiate criminal prosecution to stamp out criticism of the authorities. The laws also curb the right to operate any independent media on the internet, imposing fines and confiscation of servers that do not have a special licence from the government. While those responsible for violence against peaceful protesters at the Euromaidan have been granted impunity, the new legislation jeopardises freedoms of assembly, expression, and association, and imposes jail sentences of 10-15 years for mass disruptions or protests. On this basis, all those peacefully protesting in Ukraine this weekend can be sent to jail.

By voting for these new laws, politicians from the ruling party in Ukraine have crossed the line to authoritarian rule, suspending democracy and fundamental human rights. The new legislation contradicts the obligations of Ukraine as a member of the Council of Europe, and defies the respective commitments set out in the Eastern Partnership initiative. The EU should apply equivalent sanctions to politicians in all Eastern Partnership countries who cross the line, and must back this up by insisting that all partner countries 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. Any infringement of the Charter – a new initiative now being developed by the Civil Society Forum – should trigger EU sanctions.

The Civil Society Forum notes that the Ukrainian authorities have adopted the Russian legislation that brands non-governmental organisations receiving money from international sources as “foreign agents”, and imposes additional taxation burdens on NGOs. The dictatorial legislation in Ukraine follows the adoption by the Parliament of Azerbaijan on 17 December 2013 of new laws restricting the activities of NGOs, and creating conditions for their closure. The introduction of the new laws in Azerbaijan coincided with the three months’ detention order imposed on Anar Mammadli, the head of the Election Monitoring and Democratic Studies Center (EMDS) in Azerbaijan. Prior to October 2013, Anar Mammadli was Working Group 1 co-ordinator of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (working group for democracy, human rights, good governance, and stability). The charges against him are entirely unfounded.

It is imperative now that the EU also demonstrably supports civil society actors and citizens wishing to express their opinions freely in the Eastern Partner countries. EU support should go beyond financial aid to civil society, and extend to ensuring that all EU representatives travelling to Ukraine, Azerbaijan and other partner countries meet with representatives of civil society, and vocally support their calls for freedom of association and the removal of restrictions on civil society.

Yours faithfully,

Steering Committee, Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership