

*Kyiv, 11 July 2016*

**Address by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum  
at the Eastern Partnership Informal Partnership Meeting**

Dear Commissioner, Deputy Secretary General, Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address you all today on behalf of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

In these troubled times the adoption of the **EU's Global Strategy on Security and Foreign Policy**, in which the policies towards EU neighbours occupy a special place, is particularly significant.

The Civil Society Forum welcomes the concept of resilience, incorporating the rule of law, human rights and good governance, as well as a long-term commitment to civil society, as the basis of the EU foreign policy towards its neighbours. The importance of civil society platforms in strengthening societal links and resilience should not be underestimated. We also welcome the consistent and united approach towards Russia confirmed by the extension of the sanctions against this country.

Security challenges have been the main topic on the agenda of the EU and EaP countries for a while. We welcome the EU commitment to support building security capabilities of the EU neighbours with regard to the prevention and response to crises.

The **Warsaw NATO Summit** held last week became a symbolic event, however its results are yet to be seen. NATO and the Eastern Partnership countries are deeply interdependent in security terms and, in line with the EU Global Strategy, resilient and well-prepared neighbours should be a key NATO objective. It is in NATO's own interest to elaborate and negotiate with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova a roadmap for further co-operation with a membership perspective based on the defence strategies of the three states.

As for the **EU security initiatives**, we recommend to enhance the involvement of the EaP countries into EU CSDP missions, battle groups and regional security agreements. Civil society oversight of the defence sector spending in the EaP countries should be introduced in the reform agenda. Apart from the hard security initiatives, EU needs to strengthen the energy security cooperation programmes involving all EaP countries, in order to establish common standards and reduce energy dependence.

We also welcome the special attention to be given to the issue of the **development of SME's** at the tomorrow's meeting of the Ministers of Economy. A strong and growing SME sector can help empower the citizens to contribute to the reforms in their countries, including the fight against corruption, which has been a challenge for the region. In a long-term perspective, a stronger, more diverse business sector can provide support to independent media helping to develop media pluralism and counter disinformation.

In light of the intensifying **trade** between the EU and EaP countries, the possibility of applying the DCFTA to the disputed regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria should be explored.

We welcome the **recent initiative by DG NEAR** to consult the civil society on how to enhance the outreach and provide more effective support to a broader and more diverse range of civil society organisations; as well as the introduction of civil society fellowship programmes.

### **Country-specific issues**

The recent flare-up of the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region showed that preventing the escalation should be a priority for the EU. At the end of June Pope Francis visited **Armenia**. At the end of September, he will be in Azerbaijan and Georgia. We hope that his forthcoming visit to Baku will result in further release of political prisoners in **Azerbaijan** and building the basis for peaceful resolution of the conflict between the neighbours. Both in Armenia and Azerbaijan the process of negotiating the new framework agreements with the EU should be transparent and should include consultations with civil society.

In **Belarus**, the civil society was initially optimistic about the process of joining the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), however currently we are particularly concerned about the progress in the implementation of the Roadmap for Higher Education Reform Implementation.

In **Georgia and Ukraine**, the civil society supports the introduction of a visa-free regime since all the technical criteria have been met. While Georgia and Ukraine do not pose any essential migration challenges to the EU, visa liberalisation is the most visible sign of European integration for those countries. It will also be a tangible success for the Eastern Partnership and an important argument for these countries to stay on the pro-European path.

Decisive elections are to be held this autumn in Georgia, while Ukraine is going through a challenging reform process. The EU needs to gain momentum by supporting the progress achieved by both countries. For Ukraine, the situation of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) and their political rights is another challenge to be addressed.

**Moldova** has been going through a political turmoil for quite some time and the upcoming election is awaited with the hope of political revival. The EU support in such a challenging situation is crucial. Moreover, we are concerned about the lack of attention to the issue of human rights and human rights defenders, working environment of civil society and situation with the freedom of press in the Transnistrian region.

In all six EaP countries and the EU, there is a significant need for a greater focus on strengthening media standards, including new programmes to raise standards and ethics to counter disinformation and propaganda.

We are confident that the EU will remain united despite the recent **vote of British citizens** to leave the Union. We welcome the continuous Britain's cooperation within NATO through the recent decision to deploy additional troops to NATO's Eastern flank. Regardless of the outcome of the EU-UK negotiations, the close cooperation on the policies towards the Eastern Neighbours and Russia is crucial.

*Delivered by Iurii Vdovenko, EaP CSF Steering Committee Member*