

23 February 2016

**Statement by the Steering Committee
of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
on the lifting of EU sanctions on a number of Belarusian officials**

The EaP CSF Steering Committee calls on the Belarusian authorities to initiate talks with representatives of the Belarusian National Platform (BNP) on the establishment of a Belarusian Council of National Dialogue.

The Steering Committee (SC) of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) notes the current improvement in relations between the Republic of Belarus and the European Union (EU) signified by the lifting of EU sanctions and release of political prisoners in Belarus. These moves open the way, under the right conditions, to placing Belarusian society onto the path of stable development.

The SC recognises the view of the EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform that this is only possible if independent actors of Belarusian society are involved in „the discussion on social and political issues, challenges and promising solutions”. The BNP’s opinion is that as of now the Belarusian authorities remain unwilling to „reach an acceptable understanding between the authorities and independent actors in Belarusian society”.

At the same time, the BNP has said that it is ready to „make a constructive contribution to improving EU-Belarus relations and to deploy its expertise and play a monitoring role if the real conditions are created in Belarus for an inclusive and equitable socio-political dialogue, designed to consolidate society and to accelerate development as a part of European civilisation”.

In this event, the SC calls on the Belarusian authorities to initiate talks with representatives of the BNP on the establishment of a Belarusian Council of National Dialogue which would bring the authorities together with independent actors of Belarusian society, such as professional and business communities, religious organisations, the national cultural elite and a wide range of independent civil society organisations to discuss ways of accelerating the country’s development.

Such a Council would allow the authorities to develop a plan of reforms ahead of parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2016 working together with independent actors on the basis of consensus and in a spirit of compromise. It would also provide a tangible proof of the political will of both sides to bring about meaningful change and to improve relations between the Republic of Belarus and the EU.

The establishment of such a Council should also be accompanied by the Abolition of Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code which establishes criminal responsibility for activity on behalf of unregistered organisations, the abolition of restrictions on peaceful assembly and to freedom of expression and the simplification of registration of non profit organisations, as well as registration of foreign donations to such organisations.

Among the first tasks of the Council, it is vital to support the initiative and proactive role of civil society organisations in the examination of issues such as the accession of Belarus to the Higher Education Area, the signing by the authorities of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the European Charter of Local Self-Government and other subjects raised in the BNP position on opportunities of EU-Belarus cooperation adopted on 29 November 2015.

Members of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum