

*Brussels, 22 March 2016*

**Address of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum  
at the 5<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly**

Dear members of EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly,

Please let me share with you the CSF view of the situation in the Eastern Partnership. Each of our countries faces major challenges in these turbulent times, which make the realisation of our mission all the more urgent.

We are enduring continuing Russian pressure on the EaP countries to conform to Russia's own warped political standards, and the economic downturn resulting from low oil prices and the effect of the sanctions against Russia makes the situation worse.

As a result, the EaP leaderships are increasingly looking to Brussels for economic help. But some of these leaders continue to refuse to recognise that such support involves acceptance of governance reforms, democratic norms and respect for civil rights. These are essential if lasting stabilisation is to be achieved, and civil society is ready to work to stabilise our countries if such reforms are offered.

In **Armenia** the leadership has embarked on talks on a new agreement with Brussels, while following the clearly fraudulent constitutional referendum the authorities continue to ignore reforms advocated by civil society as is currently happening with the draft electoral code while the number of political prisoners has crept up to 13.

In **Azerbaijan** we welcome a significant gesture made by the authorities last week in freeing 14 political prisoners including our colleagues Anar Mammadli but they continue to hold others such as Khadija Ismayilova, Intigam Aliyev and Ilgar Mammadov while looking for foreign financial support and sending signals that they want to improve relations with Brussels.

In **Belarus** a dialogue between Brussels and Minsk has seen the welcome release of political prisoners and an incident free but deeply flawed presidential election. But there are still no signs that the leadership is ready to envisage change which would create space for constructive dialogue with civil society – a recent example was the absence of independent human rights organisations at the conference on the death penalty held in Minsk by the Belarusian government with participation of the EU Special Representative for Human Rights.

Nevertheless, here the CSF Steering Committee has suggested the establishment with the authorities of a Council of National Dialogue, which would allow all sides to work together for constructive change.

**Georgia** is seeing growing social tensions and a fall in support for its pro-EU choice ahead of elections this autumn. Here we urge speedy progress to the elimination of Schengen visas for Georgian citizens.

In Moldova the situation appears to have temporarily stabilised with the recent decision of the Constitutional Court to order a national ballot for post of the president. Also the government has agreed to give civil society an enhanced role in public policy and decision-making processes.

**Ukraine** is of course a special case with a war on its Eastern border. But here too the authorities are struggling to introduce reforms to challenge a culture of corruption and the powerful oligarchs who thrive on this culture. In Ukraine as elsewhere corruption is a destabilising force and a major barrier to change.

The European Union, which like the EuroNest is showing signs of fatigue with the EaP, must now more than ever pay attention to political and economic developments in our countries

The underlying instability, of which the leaderships of these countries are so afraid, makes it all the more important that our organisations in the Civil Society Forum push for governance reforms and defend human rights with the support of the European Parliament and the EuroNest, which is so ably led by Heidi Hautala and Victor Dolidze.

Civil society must not only continue to push for change but remember that if there is civil unrest triggered by anger at corrupt elites, mediation will be needed to facilitate compromises and to avoid violence. This is another area where we should work together with parliamentarians to prepare for such an eventuality.

Thank you for your attention!

*Delivered by Krzysztof Bobiński, co-chair of the EaP CSF Steering Committee*