



## EASTERN PARTNERSHIP Civil Society Forum

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**From:** Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Steering Committee

**To:**

- Governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine
- Heads of all EU institutions
  
- Governments of the EU member States
- Council of Europe

5 April 2011

### **Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum calls for:**

- **human rights, freedom of expression, and reforms towards democracy to be given top priority in EU relations with Azerbaijan and Belarus**
- **jailed civil society activists and political prisoners to be released immediately in both countries**
- **civil society representatives, especially the Civil Society Forum National Platforms, to be recognised as key partners of the EU in all Eastern Partnership countries, and establishment by the EU of a Civil Society Facility to finance the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) and support dialogue between CSOs and government in the six Eastern Partnership countries.**

The work of civil society - including those formally recognised within the framework of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, established and funded by the European Commission - continues to be obstructed by government authorities in Belarus and Azerbaijan.

### **Democracy campaigners beaten and arrested in Baku**

On 2 April 2011, peaceful protesters were beaten and arrested in Baku, the Azeri capital, and others were arrested in pre-emptive police action before the 2 April public gatherings calling for democratic reforms in Azerbaijan. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Steering Committee strongly condemns the arrest of civil society leaders, including EITI (Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative) Azerbaijan Board Member Ilham Huseynli, and the head of the Association for Atlantic Cooperation Sulheddin Akbar. The arrests are clear violations of the obligations of Azerbaijan as a member of the Council of Europe and a party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum calls upon the Azeri authorities to provide full access to the EU representation in Baku and to Azeri and international human rights organisations to detainees in prison, and for the swift release of all prisoners arrested during and before the democracy rallies.

The Azeri National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum has been working hard to secure the release of the detainees, and the Steering Committee regrets the failure of EU Council President Herman van Rompuy to meet with civil society leaders on his visit to Baku in January 2011, and urges European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle to meet with the National Platform of the Civil Society Forum on his forthcoming visit to Baku on 22 May 2011.

### **Belarus authorities obstruct meetings of civil society national platform and Eastern Partnership civil society forum steering committee**

In March 2011, government authorities in Belarus prevented a Conference of the Belarusian National

Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum taking place in Minsk by instructing the hotel approached to host the event to cancel the booking. Furthermore, the Belarusian government has obstructed the participation of a number of members of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Steering Committee from attending a Steering Committee meeting planned to take place in Minsk on 4-5 April 2011 - by failing to issue visas to four participants from EU member-states, a clear rebuke to the EU itself since the visa applications were based on invitations issued by the EU delegation in Minsk (the Steering Committee includes 10 members from the Eastern Partnership countries and seven from EU countries). As a result, a full meeting of the Steering Committee was not possible - a meeting funded by the European Commission and agreed to be held in Minsk with the personal knowledge and support of European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle.

In line with its statement of 21 December 2010, the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum reiterates its call upon the Belarusian authorities to release immediately all the democracy and human rights defenders, journalists, and opposition presidential candidates and their aides, detained in Belarus on 19 December 2010, the date of the presidential elections in Belarus.

In the joint declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership summit, signed on 7 May 2009 by the EU and six neighbouring countries, including the governments of the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Azerbaijan, the participants agreed that "the Eastern Partnership will be based on commitments to the principles of international law and to fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as to market economy, sustainable development and good governance".

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum calls upon the Azeri and Belarusian authorities to immediately release all political prisoners, and to cease obstruction to the activities of civil society, including the National Platforms of the Civil Society Forum. The Steering Committee urges the European Commission, the EU Council, and EU member-states to consult extensively with representatives of civil society, and to ensure that they meet directly with them on every official visit to Azerbaijan, Belarus, and to other Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) to hear first-hand about the observance of human rights and democratic freedoms in their respective countries.

Likewise, the Steering Committee calls upon the European Commission and EU member-states to support the full participation of civil society in the official platform meetings of the Eastern Partnership, thematic working groups, expert panels and flagship initiatives, with prior access to draft policy documents, and the establishment of a distinct Civil Society Facility under the ENPI (European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument) to finance the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) and support dialogue between CSOs and government.

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Steering Committee was elected at the meeting of more than 200 representatives of civil society who met in Berlin on 18-19 December 2010. The Civil Society Forum was established by the European Commission in 2009 "to promote contacts among civil society organisations and facilitate their dialogue with public authorities".

Plans by Civil Society Forum participants for 2011-2012 include a comparative report monitoring the observation of human rights in all six Eastern Partnership countries.

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