

Speech

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Participants to the Forum and Guests

Allow me to start my speech by saying that I am very pleased to see that the Forum which has been set up just one year ago, has turned out to be one of the most dynamic elements of the EaP.

I would like to seize this opportunity to congratulate you, and especially the members of the CSF Steering Committee, on your achievements. You have done a lot of work during the last year and today you are seen as an indispensable part of the EaP. Your representatives have been gradually involved in various EaP panels, in such areas as fight against corruption, policy towards small and medium-sized enterprises, environment and climate change. Your recommendations were presented to Foreign Ministers and senior officials from Partner countries and EU Member States. The voice of civil society has been heard. Now, we have to keep momentum and work on how we can include your points of view in the practical aspects of EaP implementation.

We want to engage you more for several reasons. First of all, because civil society involvement is a *conditio sine qua non* for the success of our common endeavour. And this conviction stems not from political correctness but from a deep belief that civil society is a fundamental part of the democratic process. The great events that have changed the face of Europe at the end of the last century would have been impossible without the “Solidarnosc” movement in Poland or the Civic Forum in former

Czechoslovakia. The city in which we meet today would still be divided by the Wall, if not for the strong desire for democracy manifested by German society. Today this experience of peaceful democratic transformation may prove very relevant for you, since the final aim of the Eastern Partnership is to provide tangible support for the transformation of Partner countries towards sustainable democracies and market-oriented economies. Reforms, which are necessary to complete the process of transition and approximation to European standards, cannot be implemented without the backing of the public. Therefore I do hope that the Forum will prove to be instrumental in promoting EaP goals in societies and mobilizing their support for reforms.

We also want to engage with you because civil society acts vis-à-vis governments as an advocate for -- and a watchdog of -- reforms. You can influence domestic political agendas and raise awareness of the importance of the EaP. In this context, let me refer to one of the long term goals of the EaP, which is visa liberalization. Facilitating greater people to people contacts between the EU and our Eastern partners is of paramount importance and certainly here is an area where your advocacy is needed. I am aware that many of you had to wait for visa before coming here and I do believe that we will be able to gradually remove barriers for free movement of people, but this can only be done if it is accompanied by improved security standards in Partner countries. We can provide assistance, for example through the flagship initiative on integrated border management, but the support of civil society organizations is also essential.

Equally, you have an important role to play in encouraging convergence towards EU standards and norms in areas such as environment, climate change, energy efficiency or consumer protection.

Just a few days ago, I visited Belarus and met with many Belarusian NGOs to show my support to Belarusian people in this important moment of the country's political life. I discussed with them the situation of Belarus' civil society and how the EU could help Belarusian civil society organizations to act and to express their views. In countries like Belarus, where people do not have full confidence in the elections and democratic process, cooperation with non-governmental organizations is even more important. This basic fact should be recognized also by EU Member States.. I want to say to Belarusian NGOs that your presence here is precious and I hope that the Forum will help you to increase your visibility and develop ties with NGOs from other Partner countries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This Forum offers a unique opportunity for CSOs from EaP countries and EU Member States to meet together and build a strong network of Civil Society Organisations, spanning many sectors of public life. When presenting the idea of setting up this Forum, our intention was to provide a platform for cooperation among various civil society players ranging from typical NGOs to trade unions and employers organizations. I hope that this distinctive character of the Forum will be maintained and will help to create added -value.

I am aware that if we are to involve you more in policy formulation and monitoring, then we need also to invest more in strengthening your capacity. I make no apologies for our efforts so far, because we are already doing a lot. In 2010 €9 million is being made available through the Eastern Partnership Culture Programme and €16.5 million is available to CSOs from the EaP countries through various financial instruments supporting actions in areas such as human rights and democracy, migration and asylum, environment, and strengthening civil society capacities.

I am also conscious that if we want civil society organisations to play a more important role in the framework of the Eastern Partnership, we need to provide you with better access to information on our activities.

I have been following your development very closely and I am aware that the Civil Society Forum is a living body that needs our assistance to fully blossom. The Forum will never reach its full potential without a coordination of activities between national platforms, working groups, the Steering Committee and last but not least, the plenary meeting of all participants. Therefore, I am delighted to draw your attention to a new CSF website, which was created in response to one of the recommendations you made last year. While the Commission finances this website, its content and all the tools it offers, are under your control.. I am sure that this will improve your cooperation and address some shortcomings that you had indicated to us last year. It will also help you to develop and promote your positions on relevant issues.

Having said this, I would like to underline that we are going to closely examine the issue of strengthening of CSOs in the context of the ongoing ENP Review. I agree with many of you that we should build a stronger link between programmes aiming at strengthening CSOs and the goals of the Eastern Partnership. We will carefully examine your proposals in this respect and reflect on the possibilities to provide additional grant support to CSOs.

Let me just say a few words on the subject of the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy we have been undertaking. First I believe all have been pleased with the wide-ranging nature of the consultations we have undertaken – with governments and with civil society. All want more political cooperation and deeper economic integration. There are of course important gaps between partners expectations and what the EU may be prepared to offer be it in the field of mobility, market access or financial support. But what seems to be emerging as a way of bridging these gaps is a gradual approach based on clearer differentiation and more rigorous conditionality.

But whatever is the final outcome of the ENP Review, I would like to now call on you to develop concrete proposals on how you can best be involved in the implementation of EaP's goals; in what ways you can add value to it and what you can offer to make it a success. You are already involved in many EaP activities and you should particularly reflect on your possible contribution and input to the work of the Eastern Partnership Panels. You have to prove to representatives of governments that your contributions and proposals can be ambitious but also constructive and attainable.

You can be sure that I will also appeal to the representatives of partner and Member State governments to cooperate closely with the Forum in the implementation of the EaP agenda. We have to elaborate forms of cooperation that will allow us to use civil society's experience to the best possible extent. The first opportunity to discuss this issue will be during the EaP Ministerial Meeting.

Thank you very much for your attention and wish you a very fruitful meeting.