



Minsk

1st July 2021

Statement of the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

In connection with the statement of the Belarusian authorities on the suspension from the Eastern Partnership initiative and the readmission agreement.

On June 28, 2021 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus announced¹ that the Republic of Belarus is suspending its participation in the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative, and is also starting to suspend the application of the readmission agreement with the EU. The Permanent Representative of the Republic of Belarus to the EU is recalled to Minsk for consultations. The Head of the EU Delegation to the Republic of Belarus has also been invited to leave for Brussels for consultations.

We, the organizations members of the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, express our absolute disagreement with the position stated by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry and insist on the further participation of the Republic of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership initiative, as well as other Belarusian-European initiatives, projects and communication formats at all levels.

It is the further approximation of Belarus to the norms and standards of the EU (rule of law, market economy, democracy, human rights) that is the priority and desire of the citizens of our country, which, among other things, was one of the main requirements of society during the socio-political campaign of 2020. To our deep regret, these priorities and desires are systematically ignored by representatives of the Belarusian authorities. We are firmly convinced that the declared suspension participation in the Eastern Partnership and the readmission agreement causes significant harm to national interests and is oriented in a direction opposite to the aspirations and needs of the Belarusian people. We insist on keeping Belarus in the Eastern Partnership, abandoning aggressive rhetoric and moving on to looking for points of intersection of interests in the current crisis conditions.

Over the years of participation in the Eastern Partnership initiative, Belarus has received many dividends. Many financial and infrastructural opportunities for cooperation have arisen for it, as well as opportunities for cooperation with other countries of the Eastern Partnership. During this time, close partnerships have been formed at the level of civil society and significant and useful joint projects have been initiated both with partners from the EU countries and our colleagues from the Eastern Neighborhood countries. It is possible to suppose that the authorities of Belarus must see these opportunities for cooperation, which are equally available for them, as useless. To our regret, the official authorities of Belarus have always apprehensively taken part in this initiative, depriving the Belarusian citizens of a more dynamic and value-oriented development as a consequence of the intensification of relations and the formation of mutual trust with European partners. However, this did not prevent Belarus from using the EU grant funds generated by the contribution of European taxpayers.

The Belarusian civil society has always considered the Eastern Partnership as one of the most important initiatives enriching the Belarusian society, giving a new impetus and development guidelines. That is why our organizations were among the first to form the Belarusian national platform within the initiative of the Civil Society Forum. We also offered ourselves and our experts as equal and concerned partners to both the

¹ https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/e0c39160d2580d78.html

Belarusian authorities and EU representatives for joint work. To our deep regret, such a proposal was met with much greater interest by the European side, whereas the Belarusian authorities (as well as for a long time before that) treated us with suspicion, distrust and sometimes fear, avoiding any significant and certainly equitable contacts.

The suspension of the readmission agreement demonstrates the inability to reach agreement, shortsightedness and short-term nature of interests of today's Belarusian authorities. We, on our part, do not see any reason for our country to abandon its obligations and opportunities of simplifying border and visa relations.

Like many months before this moment, we urge the authorities of Belarus:

- To immediately release all civil and political activists detained or convicted during the socio-political crisis of 2020-2021; stop political persecution of dissent.
- To restore the legal system in our country, restore trust in justice, fairness of court decisions.
- To abandon confrontation and demonstrate meaningful steps in establishing a dialogue within the Belarusian society and in relations with international partners.
- We call on the representatives of the European Union, as well as other partners within the Eastern Partnership initiative:
- To maintain commitment to and priority of democratic values and norms as a basis of the Eastern Partnership initiative.

To consider the Republic of Belarus as a layered society that combines different organizational forms, interests, opportunities and values. To keep the doors of the Eastern Partnership, open and attractive for those Belarusian players who see merit in it and are interested in engaging in cooperation with partners from the EU and the Eastern Neighborhood countries.

Despite the refusal of the Belarusian authorities to participate in the EaP processes, preserve political and infrastructural opportunities for participation for representatives of the non-state sector of our country: commercial players, civil society organizations, representatives of the professional and expert community of our country in various sectors.

The Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum was founded in July 2010 and embraces more than 80 organizations and initiatives of various fields of activity based on pro-European values.

