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Speech at the Eastern Partnership Conference "Towards a European Community of Democracy, Prosperity and a Stronger Civil Society"

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Eastern Partnership Summit

Warsaw, 29 September 2011

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your discussions set the scene for tomorrow's debates among the leaders at the Summit. Tomorrow, we will review the achievements of the Eastern Partnership and discuss how to pursue our common goals.

We value your opinion, so allow me to outline the main issues:

- First - what has the Eastern Partnership achieved since it was launched?
- Second – where has the Eastern Partnership been less successful?
- Third – how will the ongoing evolution of the European Neighbourhood Policy affect the Eastern Partnership?
- Fourth - what challenges will we face in the coming years?

First: our achievements. Since the 2009 Prague Summit, we have created a new, distinct relationship between the EU and our Eastern neighbours. Our partners are at various stages of establishing sustainable democracy, founded on respect for fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. The less advanced this is, the more difficult, but also the more necessary, your work is.

Some of our Partners express clear aspirations to join the European Union. The Eastern Partnership supports their work to consolidate sustainable democracies and market-economies. Deep reforms bring ever closer political association and deeper economic integration with the European Union within reach.

The Eastern Partnership is innovative and inclusive as it reaches out to all stakeholders: government, parliaments, regional and local authorities, business community, and - last but not least - civil society.

The Civil Society Forum is increasingly involved in most activities within multilateral track of the Eastern Partnership. And I am committed to help enhance its role and capacities.

Developing a multilateral dimension for the Eastern partnership is an important achievement. It complements each country's bilateral relations with the European Union. It provides a forum to exchange experience and good practice between EU Member States and our Eastern Partners, and among our Partners.

Through the Eastern Partnership platforms and panels, we are dealing with a broad range of issues.

We have initiated Comprehensive Institution Building programmes to strengthen the efficiency, transparency and accountability of our Partners' key government institutions.

We launched five Flagship Initiatives to deliver tangible benefits for Partner countries' citizens in key areas like: integrated border management, Small and Medium Enterprises, energy efficiency, environment protection and civil protection.

And we have stepped up our financial support. Our overall budget for bilateral and regional cooperation amounts to over 1.9 billion euro for 2010-13.

We are advancing in our bilateral agenda with Partners. The goal is to negotiate Association Agreements, including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, with all willing Partners. Such negotiations are already in a very advanced stage with Ukraine.

Mobility and people-to-people contacts are important aspects of the Eastern Partnership. We are now implementing Visa Action Plans with Ukraine and Moldova, with the aim of visa liberalisation. Visa facilitation and readmission agreements are being implemented with Georgia and we hope to negotiate similar agreements with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus.

This brings me to my second point – in some areas, I wish we had achieved more.

The progress of reforms in some countries has not been as constant, comprehensive and advanced as we hoped. In a number of cases, we have noted back-sliding, for instance regarding freedom of media or rule of law.

Clearly, our relations with Belarus remain a thorn in the side of the Eastern Partnership. Following the crackdown on the opposition and civil society, we re-imposed sanctions against the Minsk regime. However, we will not isolate Belarusian people. I remain personally committed to engagement with the opposition, human rights defenders and free media for as long as it takes.

Equally painful is the slow progress in effectively solving conflicts in the region.

As my third point, let's consider the ongoing evolution of the European Neighbourhood Policy and its impact on the Eastern Partnership.

Events in our Southern neighbourhood illustrate that long term stability cannot be assured by non-democratic regimes. In response, throughout its neighbourhood, the European Union is putting an even stronger emphasis on promoting deep and sustainable democracy.

Several days ago, the Commission established a Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility. For 2011, the budget of the Facility is 22 million. We also aim to set up a European Endowment for Democracy.

Lastly, we need to communicate our work to citizens. Improving the visibility of our activities within the Eastern Partnership is certainly a challenge for the future.

Finally, what are the other challenges for the future?

The principle of "more for more" between the EU and Partners needs to become a reality. This will require efforts on all sides.

When Partners make genuine progress in reform programmes, the European Union must respond accordingly. This includes providing financial support, making travel easier and allowing access to the EU market.

By implementing ambitious reform agenda and building sustainable democracies, our partners will also have improved the lives of their own citizens and made their European aspirations credible.

My final message is clear: without a well-functioning and adequately supported civil society, the Eastern Partnership has no chance of success. We count on your contribution to promote the reform agenda and fostering democratic values in Partner countries.

As promised at my last meeting with the Steering Committee of the Civil Society Forum, I asked the EU delegations in the six Partner countries to organise a series of meetings with the National Platforms of the Civil Society Forum to prepare for this Summit, in co-operation with the governmental authorities.

These meetings have occurred in all six countries and we are currently reflecting on their results. I share many of the concerns you raised, including the lack of information about the Eastern Partnership in your countries and the need to encourage governments to create inclusive processes for your participation.

Today, I spoke about establishing a Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility. This can support your efforts - at national, regional and local levels, where the voice of civil society is equally needed. I hope to continue this delegation-facilitated dialogue in a structured way.

I read with great interest the Position Paper prepared by the Civil Society Forum. Your recommendations merit deeper reflection. I will discuss one of them, namely 'association via sectorial integration', at tomorrow's Summit.

Tomorrow, we hope to agree on a renewed Eastern Partnership agenda. At the next Civil Society Forum in Poznan, we will be able to discuss plans for its implementation. I look forward to debating how we should move forward together.

Thank you for your attention.