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THE PRESIDENT**



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**Opening address by Herman Van Rompuy,
President of the European Council,
to Civil Society Forum “Armenia in Europe”**

It is a pleasure for me to be in Yerevan today and to be here at this event. I am looking very much forward to listening and exchanging views with you.

I am glad to see that the theme of “Armenia in Europe” attracts such attention from civil society organisations in Armenia. If there is one message I want to leave you with today, it is the following – the joint project of bringing Armenia closer to the EU will only work and will only meet its potential if it is understood and supported by citizens. And here you have a critical role to play.

First, couple of words on how I see the developments in Armenia, something I will also discuss with President Sargsyan later today.

Armenia’s commitment to reforms based on the core values of the European Union, and geared at approximating to the standards and norms of the EU is very welcome. This is clearly a strategic choice made by Armenia.

P R E S S

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I will encourage President Sargsyan, as I will encourage your parliamentarians, to let Armenia continue on the path towards strengthening its democratic institutions, to promote transparency, to root out corruption and to respect Human Rights and the rule of law, including the right to free speech and press. Armenia is on the right track, even if there is still work ahead.

I will also point out that the European Union is prepared to support Armenia. The stronger the commitment to pursue genuine reform and to uphold our shared values, the more you will be able to count on the EU.

In this context, The European Union welcomes the efforts which the Armenian authorities made to deliver more competitive and transparent parliamentary elections. This was an important step forward, although there still are some issues that will need to be addressed, as identified in the Final Report by the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission. We trust that these issues will be addressed before the upcoming Presidential elections.

Where does the Civil Society come in to the picture? I can only stress the importance you play as a force in the reform process.

Let me underline three main areas which are intimately linked and where your role is essential also when it comes to serving the cause of relations between Armenia and the EU: monitoring the progress of reform, encouraging accountability, and deepening expertise.

First, let me begin with monitoring the progress of reform. At the heart of the relation between Armenia and the EU we have a common set of goals and commitments. We depend to a great extent on civil society to map progress on these agendas, whether on human rights, press freedom, higher education reform or any other area.

We should not forget that these inputs cover economic as well as political domains: your work is absolutely fundamental to our understanding of areas such as the business and investment climate or the tax system. Your efforts feed each year into our own progress reports.

The second point I wished to stress is encouraging accountability – this means being a voice for citizens and keeping them informed, in particular those from groups that are marginalized or under-represented in civil discourse. Let me give an example: to ensure the full respect of minority rights, we need direct lines of communication with the minorities themselves, through trusted and reliable representatives who can articulate their social, economic and political needs.

Third, ladies and gentlemen, is the development of expertise. We are setting up dialogues, supporting reforms and providing financial and technical assistance on a great number of fronts, from the environment, to agriculture, to public health.

In order to succeed, we need constant advice on the state of legislation and institutions here in Armenia, on the challenges to bringing them closer to the norms and standards of the EU, and on the worries and concerns which citizens may have. Much of this expertise resides among ecology organizations, patients' organizations, media monitoring bodies and so on – and we need it if the priorities for our cooperation are to be realistic and focused on the needs of citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen, these are three among the many reasons why civil society matters to us – we expect a lot from you and in return you have the right to expect something from us in terms of recognition and support.

Let me start with recognition: in its approach to the region, as part of our “Eastern Partnership”, the European Union has aimed from the very beginning to reach out beyond governments - to civil society, to national parliaments, to regional and local authorities. A Civil Society Forum has been established: its basic objectives are to support civil society organisations, promote contacts among them and to facilitate their dialogue with the authorities.

Since its creation in 2009, the Forum has become an integral part of the Eastern Partnership, helping to turn commitments into concrete results throughout the region.

Here in Armenia recognition is also important. I am glad that several meetings have taken place between the Civil Society Forum National Platform and representatives of the government. We need to build on this to achieve a systematic and continuous dialogue – that is the only way to progress from formality to substance.

Recognition by government is of course also very important, as is the respect for the independence of civil society when it brings messages which are uncomfortable or unwelcome.

I also mentioned the right for civil society to expect our support. We will continue to provide financial assistance directly to civil society organisations, in all the areas where we are engaged.

As I draw to a close let me underline the vital role of civil society in achieving genuine reforms and democratisation. The greater the engagement of civil society, the stronger democracy will be, in terms of political pluralism and a reliable system of checks and balances.

Ladies and gentlemen, in my address to Parliament one of my core messages will be that Armenia's fulfillment of its enormous potential, including in the political association with the EU, depends upon achieving medium to long-term stability and predictability. This can only be achieved by eliminating the threat of conflict, and addressing the consequences of previous conflict as well. Here also civil society has an important role to play, by encouraging and serving the peaceful resolution of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The assessment I have often received is that public perceptions, expectations and fears relating to the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process are disconnected from the interactions between political leaders at the negotiating table. Without fully involving that the societies affected by the conflict in the peace process, this phase of the negotiations could fail, with serious impact for long-term stability in the region.

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen, you have a vital role to play in the reform and peace processes of Armenia. My presence here today shows you, I hope, that at the very highest level in the EU we rely on you and we look to you for support. In all areas your help can make a crucial difference, in particular in monitoring commitments and results. We count on you to hold our upcoming bilateral agreement to the highest standard – its success depends also on your involvement!