**The EU needs a strategic compass to establish its strong position in the world**

**The situation of civil society in Belarus following the presidential elections in August 2020 and the huge level of repression, as well as the tragic fate of the people in Afghanistan, show that the EU has to speak up with one voice in the geopolitical arena.**

The EESC's External Relations Section (REX) held a hybrid meeting in September 2021, bringing together speakers from EU Institutions and civil society organisations to discuss the critical situation in Belarus, evaluate the latest developments in the Eastern Partnership framework and consider the EU's role in Afghanistan.

**The EU can be more than a state-building operator in Afghanistan**

In his opening remarks on Afghanistan, REX Section president **Dimitris Dimitriadis** stressed the external dimension of the situation in the country, in the light of Europe's presence in the region and its future role, not to mention the humanitarian aspect.

The chaotic departure from Kabul left the EU uncertain about the future of Afghanistan and the geostrategic agenda of the region. The joint statement of Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran on Afghanistan and on how to promote peace, security and stability in the country showcased their intention to become active players politically and economically.

The Afghanistan crisis underlined the EU's lack of a foreign and defence policy, a constant sticking point in the European narrative. All the participants agreed that Europe needs to be more assertive on the international scene, taking a more active role and ceasing to be "a dwarf".

**Petras Auštrevičius** MEP,chair of the EP's Delegation for relations in Afghanistan, remarked that the EU had no military presence in the area: "The whole operation was led by NATO, leaving the EU with just the state-building projects and development assistance."

The EU has to create a strategic compass and become an equal partner in the world's geopolitical arena. "We needed a coherent foreign and defence policy, with all Member States speaking with one voice, and more efforts to build European diplomatic and military capabilities" stressed the participants in the debate.

**A democratic future for Belarus is not lost**

Despite the dramatic situation in Belarus – the authoritarian regime, the economy in disarray, and the imprisonment on a daily basis of opposition leaders, civil society representatives and journalists –, a democratic future for Belarus is not a lost cause, as many may think.

**Aleś Alachnovič**, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's representative for economic reforms and member of the Belarus Coordination Council's Economic Group, pointed out that democratic forces were striving to work on a positive agenda so that they were ready to implement reforms based on the economic programme drawn up by the EU and the US for a democratic Belarus.

**Evelina Schulz**, from the EU Delegation to Belarus, called for support for civil society, independent media and small and medium enterprises, emphasising: "Any decision about the future of Belarus has to be made in Belarus and by Belarusian people".

As **Hanna Liubakova**, a journalist forced to flee the country, pointed out: "Lukashenko is actually destroying the ecosystem of media, and once this is done it becomes easy to spread Russian narratives and propaganda." The result was that journalists had been detained, media outlets shut down, websites blocked and journalists forced to flee their homeland and operate from abroad.

Ms Liubakova emphasised the importance of civil society: "A country without civil society is much weaker. It is nearly impossible to self-organise in Belarus without facing a prison term, but people continue to operate in unions and associations. They remain resilient despite unprecedented levels of repression."

**Max Bogretsov**, entrepreneur, IT specialist and member of the Belarus Coordination Council, said the people of Belarus were committed to moving forward to a free and democratic state, though many hurdles stood in the way. He noted that in the past twelve months the agenda of Belarusian civil society had changed from trying to promote democratic institutions to defending basic human rights.

One of the EESC's foreign policy objectives is to liaise with Belarusian civil society, with business associations and independent trade unions and to advocate for media freedom.

**An Eastern Partnership fit for the future**

Against the backdrop of the most challenging situation in the region since 2009, the Eastern Partnership Summit planned for 15 December 2021 will bring an updated and dynamic agenda, characterised by the word *resilience* in five main areas: economy, democratic development, environment, digital transformation and society.

The EU remains fully engaged with its Eastern partners, highlighting tangible achievements of the Eastern Partnership policy and the real contribution it has been bringing to the people.

As **Jeroen Willems**, from the Commission's DG NEAR, explained: "Civil society and young people play a key role in the 'fit for the future' agenda. We understood that it was crucial to visit regions and reach out to local partners and civil society organisations."

**Andrius Kubilius** MEP, co-chair of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, highlighted the utmost geopolitical importance of the Eastern Partnership policy, as it covers countries in the EU's immediate neighbourhood. He also pointed out the instability and the democratic challenges the region is facing.

In his remarks, **Richard Giragosian**, from the Regional Studies Centre think-tank in Armenia, stressed: "The Eastern partnership framework is not only fit for the future but precious for the present."