**27 October 2013, Vilnius**

**3rd Belarusian Human Rights Defenders Forum**

**Appeal to Eastern Partnership Summit**

We, the representatives of the Belarusian human rights community, the participants of the 3rd Belarusian Human Rights Defenders Forum, view the Eastern Partnership program as a means of bringing the partner countries closer to the European standards in all spheres. However, the development of the trade and economies of the partner countries cannot be separated from the socio-political and humanitarian dimension of the European standards, including in the field of human rights.

With this in mind, we state that at the moment, the Eastern Partnership program is far enough from realizing its potential to the full extent to improve the human rights situation in the Eastern Europe. We are concerned that during the program implementation, we have observed the division of countries into those where the European human rights standards take root, and those where there is a regression in the field of human rights.

Unfortunately, Belarus falls within the latter group. Our optimism at the start of the program has for the most part not come true. The potential of the Eastern Partnership was particularly undermined by the events that followed the presidential elections in Belarus in 2010, when a wave of repressions and human rights violations blocked, in fact, any possible dialogue between Europe and the official Minsk. As a result, Belarus is involved in the Eastern Partnership only nominally, with no action and political will shown on the part of the Government.

We place the blame for the failure to maintain the dialogue and realize the potential of the Eastern Partnership for Belarus on the political leadership of the country. The existence of political prisoners in the country, along with the other gross violations of human rights, makes Belarus’ actual and productive participation in the Eastern Partnership impossible.

We welcome the deepening of the EU integration with the partner countries, including the conclusion of the Agreements on Association and on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. We are particularly pleased with and inspired by the positive experience of our neighbour, Ukraine, showing the reality of the European choice for a nation closely related to Belarusians.

However, we believe that human rights cannot be used as a bargaining chip. The sustainable development and modernization of our country is impossible without democratization and respect for human rights on the part of the Government.

In this regard, we urge the Summit to make efforts toward encouraging the Government of Belarus to remove the barriers, which impede the country’s full-scale participation in the Eastern Partnership.

**We see the immediate and unconditional release of the political prisoners and their reinstatement as the first out of a series of such steps.** We believe that progression of Belarus toward reforms and European standards in all the areas is possible via the mutually beneficial implementation of the European Dialogue on Modernization with Belarus, on the basis of full-scale and equal participation of the country’s Government and civil society in collaboration with the European Union. We see this program as an additional means to compensate for our country’s lagging behind in the partnership, including in terms of the political and legislative reforms.

We call upon the partner countries not to withdraw the humanitarian dimension of the cooperation from the agenda and to consider the human rights issues when determining the future path for the Eastern Partnership development.