

**Opening remarks by Prime Minister Straujuma**  
**Eastern Partnership Civil Society Conference, Riga**  
**20 May 2015**

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a privilege to welcome you to Riga, and to the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Conference.

This is one of three side events at the Eastern Partnership Summit this week.

Across Riga, a conference on media freedom is also getting underway this morning. And tomorrow we will host a business forum to promote regional economic integration.

They are all important pillars of the Eastern Partnership. Reflecting not only its reach, but its ambition.

To create an area of peace and stability, development and prosperity. And to bring Partner societies closer to the EU.

I am in no doubt that it is one of the EU's most valuable tools.

And this week is an opportunity to redefine and reboot the Partnership. To ensure it fulfils its ambition, and responds to the aspirations of citizens, who strive for democracy, development and the rule of law.

It is a chance to build on agreements signed last year with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

And to advance the mobility agenda, which is opening up new possibilities for cooperation in business, science and education.

And it is an opportunity to tailor each Eastern Partnership relationship to the specific needs of the country in question.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Civil society is at the absolute heart of this vision.

Because it is people not governments who uphold our institutions and values. Who demand reforms and hold their leaders to account. Whose hopes guide our decisions, and shape our futures.

Events in Ukraine in the last year illustrate the vital role civil society can play in promoting peace and prosperity. And the risks to security and stability if it does not or is not allowed to.

So we need an active civil society, fully engaged in the Eastern Partnership process. A civil society that is vocal and vibrant. As an enabler of progress. And a safeguard of democracy.

It is why we are hosting this event today. And I am grateful to all the civil society stakeholders, from so many countries, who made the effort to be here.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the next two days, you will be able to engage in dialogue, exchange ideas and knowledge, and address the pressing questions.

Like the strategic role of civil society in the Eastern Partnership. Or how civil society can help promote better governance, social inclusion and sustainable growth.

In my view today's conference is about friendship – by strengthening links both with the EU and between partners.

It's about flexibility – by tailoring policies and programmes to individual countries.

And it's about fresh-thinking – to make sure the Partnership evolves to meet the challenges of 2015 and beyond.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It has been a pleasure to speak to you this morning. I would like to thank all of you for attending.

And I would like to thank the organisers for what I am confident will be an excellent event.

Thank you for listening to me and please enjoy the conference!