

EU-Georgia Civil Society Platforms

Lessons learned



The project benefits from the support through the EaP CSF Re-granting Scheme. Within its Re-granting Scheme, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) supports projects of the EaP CSF members with a regional dimension that contribute to achieving the mission and objectives of the Forum.

The donors of the Re-granting Scheme are the European Union and National Endowment for Democracy.

The overall amount for the 2017 call for proposals is 290.000 EUR. Grants are available for CSOs from the Eastern Partnership and EU countries.

Key areas of support are democracy and human rights, economic integration, environment and energy, contacts between people, social and labour policies.

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The aim of the project is to analyze the experience and current situation in the EU-Georgia and the EU-Moldova bilateral civil society platforms and developing recommendations for the decision makers on both making changes and improvements in these platforms as well as using their experience in forming of similar platform between Armenia and the EU. Three organizations from Armenia (Eurasia Partnership Foundation), Georgia (Foundation Liberal Academy) and Moldova (Promo-LEX Association) jointly examined the existing experience, used the expertise of Armenian, Georgian and Moldovan civil society organizations, meet with respective stakeholders in all three countries and the EU, developed recommendations for all three countries, as well as presented and advocated these recommendations to the decision makers.

The project consists of series of meetings and interviews with the representatives of national authorities, civil society actors, as well as representatives of the EU Delegations to develop country reports and recommendations addressed to Armenian, Georgian and Moldovan governments and the EU.

As a result of the project consolidated report and set of recommendations covering three countries were developed as a civil society input to the institutionalization of the bi-lateral relations between the three EaP countries and the EU.

List of abbreviations

AA-Association Agreement

ANP- Armenian National Platform

CS-Civil Society

CSP- Civil Society Platform

DCFTA- Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area

EaP CSF- Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

EaP- Eastern Partnership

ENP- European Neighbourhood Policy

EU DEL- European Union Delegation

EU- European Union

GNP- Georgian National Platform

NGO- Non Governmental Organization

NIA- National Integrity Authority

NIF-Neighbourhood Investment Facility

NP-National Platform

OGP-Open government Partnership

SCC-State Constitutional Commission

TI-Transparency International

WG-Working Group

Georgia

Executive summary

Civil society organisations have more than two decades of experience in Georgia. According to the 2016 data, there are more than 23,561 non-government organisations registered in the country.¹ However, the number of organisations that are active in the process of effectively implementing their agenda is much smaller. Nevertheless, the number of NGOs is still large, especially taking into account Georgia's total population. The existing regulations in Georgia that define the rules for establishing and functioning NGOs in most cases facilitate the simplicity and flexibility of their operation. A survey conducted by the Institute of Social Studies and Analysis² states that civil society organisations consider the country's legal environment to be liberal and favourable.

One of the key components for the sustainable development of civil society is ensuring its financial stability. The Georgian Law on Grants³ allows non-government organisations to seek a wide variety of funding sources both inside the country and outside its boundaries. In addition, it is not mandatory to legally register for civic activism and implementation of projects in Georgia, which in turn contributes to the expansion of the civil sector. Therefore, the country's civil society combines both formal and informal associations, such as initiative groups.

The activities of the civil society organisations and their capabilities have moved to a completely new phase after the intensification of Georgia-EU relations. On the one hand, the European Union's policy focused on the importance of having constant and active communication with civil society, and on the other hand, the increase of financial assistance to the civil sector has contributed to the strengthening of its capabilities and skills, as well as to the introduction of high civic participation and engagement practices in the country.

This part of the study analyses civil society's level of participation and the engagement tools at its disposal for the decision-making process in Georgia. It also assesses the institutional mechanisms of civic participation and current practice of cooperation between the Georgian authorities and civil society in the context of the Association Agreement between Georgia and the European Union and EU Eastern Partnership Programme.

¹United States Agency for International Development, Bureau for Europe and Eurasia; The 2016 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia (2017)

https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CSOSI_Report_7-28-17.pdf

²Institute of Social Studies and Analysis; Engagement Of Civil Society In Policy Dialogue In Georgia (Tbilisi, 2014)
http://www.csdialogue.eu/sites/default/files/mapping_study_of_engagement_in_policy_in_%20georgia_georgian.pdf

³ Georgian Law on Grants <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/1498915>

Background

The European Union and Georgia have enjoyed a very close and positive relationship since 1992, after the recognition of Georgia's independence by the European Union. The EU strongly supports Georgia's ambitions for closer ties with the EU and considers it an important partner both within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and its eastern dimension under the Eastern Partnership (EaP).

After the European Union and Georgia initiated the Association Agreement (AA), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) Agreement at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit, the cooperation between the parties became more comprehensive and fruitful.

Georgia's European aspirations are fully recognised by its citizens. According to a public opinion poll (2017) released by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and CRRC Georgia, support for the European Union (EU) has risen to 77 percent from 72 percent in November 2016.⁴ The reasons for supporting Georgia's European integration are largely related both to economic and employment concerns, as well as the fact that Georgian citizens have benefitted from visa-free travel to the Schengen area since 28 March 2017. This significant achievement is a tangible result for all citizens.

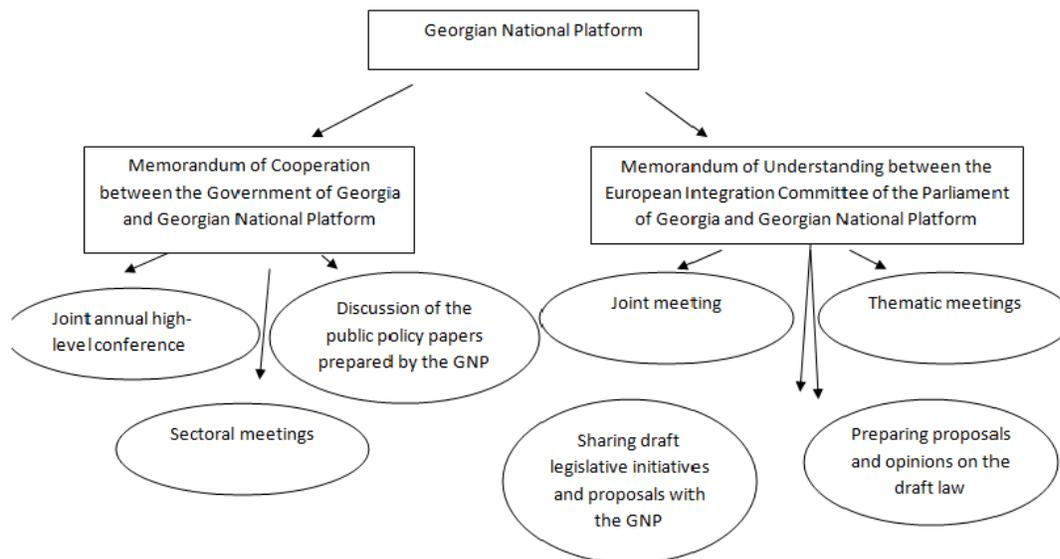
Civil society in Georgia was actively involved in the EU-Georgia relationship after the inception of the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004). The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was intended to enhance democracy in the target countries, encourage economic development, protect human rights and bring the countries closer to the EU. Georgia agreed to a set of reform priorities with the EU under the ENP in an individual action plan that was ratified in 2006. The plan covers a wide range of areas of Georgian domestic politics, economics, governance and security. Civil society in Georgia has been actively involved in the development and monitoring of the ENP process from the beginning and its involvement has been important to ensure wider understanding of the ENP process, and broader participation in the development of the action plan. In September 2005, approximately 70 civil society organisations, with the support of the Open Society-Georgia Foundation and the Heinrich Boell Foundation, prepared recommendations to be considered during the development of the action plan.

Since 2006, the Georgian Government and the EU have continued to update and evaluate the implementation of the action plan. In order to maintain civil society involvement, in 2006 the Open Society-Georgia Foundation, the Heinrich Boell Foundation and the Eurasia Foundation initiated a European Neighbourhood Policy monitoring group. As a part of this initiative the group prepared

⁴ Public attitudes in Georgia, NDI , CRRC Georgia , April 2017
https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_April%202017_Foreign%20Affairs_ENG_vf.pdf

improvement of mechanisms that enables the participation of civil society in the decision-making process (see figure 1).

Figure 1.



According to the memorandum signed with the Government, two pre-agreed sectoral meetings are held every six months with two ministries focused on discussing thematic challenges and other relevant issues. The Government has also made a commitment to consider policy documents developed by the Georgian National Platform. The policy documents may be discussed at sectoral meetings as well as annual joint meetings. The later format includes summing up the annual results and planning the priorities for future cooperation. Practice has shown that communication with the Georgian Government has been more intense in many directions than outlined in the memorandum.

In 2015-2016, the GNP actively participated in the development of the Association Agreement Action Plan with the European Union. While working on the Action Plan, the GNP prepared a total of 39 recommendations, out of which 10 recommendations were fully adopted by the Government and 7 were partially adopted. A similar work process is underway to draw up the Action Plan 2017, but as long as the Association Agenda is still in development, there are some obstacles in this regard. It should be noted that there is no practice of such cooperation between the Government and civil society in any of the other EaP countries.

[between-eap-csf-georgian-national-platform-and-the-government-of-georgia&catid=3%3Anews&Itemid=1428&lang=en-GB](#)

Another extremely important issue is the discussion of policy documents with the Government. By the end of 2016, the GNP developed 24 policy documents on issues related to the Association Agreement, which are being discussed in the format of sectoral meetings with the Government. Altogether, 12 sectoral meetings have been held and, on seven occasions, the GNP has received feedback from the relevant bodies. Effective implementation of this format is a significant progress on the way to strengthening civic participation.

As for the memorandum signed with the Parliament's European Integration Committee, it includes a specific action plan. The latter states that in order to approximate and harmonise Georgian legislation with EU laws, the Parliament's European Integration Committee shall ensure the Georgian National Platform's participation in the process of drafting legislative initiatives. The committee also has to inform the GNP about planned committee meetings and ensure the attendance of its members.

The committee shall attach the GNP's assessments to all draft laws prepared by it. The action plan defines that the thematic meetings shall be held once a month between the Georgian National Platform and the Committee, and once a year a joint session shall be held to review and discuss the annual report on the committee's activities. If necessary, the action plan may be revised and/or updated.

At this stage, the committee has submitted 15 draft laws and 11 agreements to the GNP for consideration. According to the GNP secretariat, it submitted 169 recommendations on the 4 draft laws. Two of these draft laws are in the process of consideration and on the remaining two draft laws, the GNP has not yet received feedback from the committee.⁹

The Georgian National Platform was also actively involved in the development of constitutional amendments. Furthermore, the GNP representative was a member of the State Constitutional Commission (SCC) along with representatives of six major NGOs. In addition to the SCC format, the GNP held several meetings with the President of Georgia and the Chairman of the Parliament. Platform members presented their opinions at the meetings. It should be noted that several proposals by the GNP representative were included in the final draft of the Constitution.¹⁰

Besides active involvement in the form of a direct dialogue with the Government, the GNP takes part in various other activities; it permanently issues statements and releases on important state issues and is active in the media in delivering the opinion of civil society to the public. In addition,

⁹ Interview with GNP secretariat. 10 August 2017

¹⁰ GNP activities in the development of constitutional amendments, 2017
http://eap-csf.ge/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=779%3Ainformation-meeting-with-the-speaker-of-the-parliament-of-georgia&catid=3%3Anews&Itemid=1428&lang=en-GB
http://eap-csf.ge/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=794%3Asaqarthvelos-erovnuli-platformis-shekhvedra-saqarthvelos-prezidentthan-sakonstitucio-cvlilebebis-sakithkhebze&catid=1%3Aakhali-ambebi&Itemid=1338&lang=ka-GE

in 2017 the Platform issued an address to the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe on the revision of the Georgian Constitution.¹¹

Significant progress is evident in the cooperation between the Government and civil society. The above-mentioned memorandums and the quality of their implementation is its unequivocal proof. However, despite that fact, there are still a number of issues that require an adequate response to increase the effectiveness of this process.

According to GNP National Coordinator Kakha Gogolashvili, more preliminary consultations and preparation should be undertaken between civil society organisations as well as relevant authorities in order to make existing cooperation formats more efficient and productive.¹²

When considering the Georgian National Platform's efficiency and sustainability, it is important to mention issues related to its funding. In the framework of the European Neighbourhood Instrument 2014-2020 Action Plan, in 2017 a direct grant was allocated to the GNP. However, it is not yet known whether the EU will continue funding the GNP. Thus, the issue of diversification of donors is still on the agenda.

Association Agreement signing and mechanisms of civil society involvement

The EU-Georgia Association Agreement entered into force in July 2016 and strives for political association and economic integration between the EU and Georgia. The EU and Georgia have also entered into a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA).

For effective implementation of reforms under the Association Agreement, the latter provides direct mechanisms for civil society involvement in the decision-making process. All parts of the AA foresee a general principle of transparency by which the Government of Georgia is obliged to provide the transparency of its decision-making process through preliminary, timely notification and public discussions, relevant and timely communications and consultations with the non-government sector.

Institutional mechanisms contained in the AA provide important opportunities for civil society organisations to engage in the decision-making process. The institutional mechanisms for strengthening civic participation within the Association Agreement are:¹³

- Joint civil society dialogue forum;
- Government consultations;

¹¹Appeal of EaP CSF GNP to the Venice Commission <http://eap-csf.ge/images/doc/gancxadeba/appeal%20of%20eap%20csf%20gnp%20to%20the%20venice%20commission.pdf>

¹² Interview with GNP National Coordinator Kakha Gogolashvili, 8 June 2017

¹³ Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/9740/EU/Georgia%20Association%20Agreement

- EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform.

The Parties to the Association Agreement shall facilitate a joint forum with civil society within their territories, including members of the local advisory group(s) and the general public. The Dialogue Forum aims at organising a dialogue on trade and sustainable development issues, introducing updated information and discussing the proposals and opinions of the forum members. According to the agreement, the forum will meet annually.

The format of Government consultations includes setting up consultative groups/advisory councils composed of representatives of NGOs, experts, educational circles, who are actively involved in the implementation of the Association Agreement, and provide their recommendations to the Government.

Creating these types of formats for trade-related issues is obligatory, but it should also be noted that similar types of advisory groups had been created in some ministries even before signing the Association Agreement. In accordance with the AA, the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia established an advisory group on DCFTA issues in 2015, which gives the opportunity to the parties to the Agreement to submit their opinions or recommendations on their implementation, including by their own initiatives. Up to now, four meetings were held at the advisory group. The last meeting on 7 June was mainly dedicated to providing the relevant information to civil society members.¹⁴ A recent meeting of the advisory group was very interesting. On 2 November 2016, the attendees discussed the DCFTA part of the draft EU-Georgia Association Agenda for 2017-2020. Lia Todua, the programme manager of the momxmarebeli.ge project of the Centre for Strategic Research and Development of Georgia, laid out several specific recommendations at the meeting and, after that, concrete thematic issues were discussed. However, according to Lia Todua, she was unaware whether the ministry took her recommendations into account.¹⁵ This cannot be determined from the protocol of the meeting received from the Ministry.

The EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform (CSP) is staffed by nine civil society representatives on the EU side, including members of the European Economic and Social Committee, and 18 civil society organisation representatives on the Georgian side. The latter includes nine full members and nine associates, including members of the Georgian National Platform, as well as representatives of businesses, trade unions and non-platform organisations.

It is important to note that, in accordance with EU practices, the Georgian side of the platform was initially set to be staffed by only nine representatives. However, the Georgian side considered that

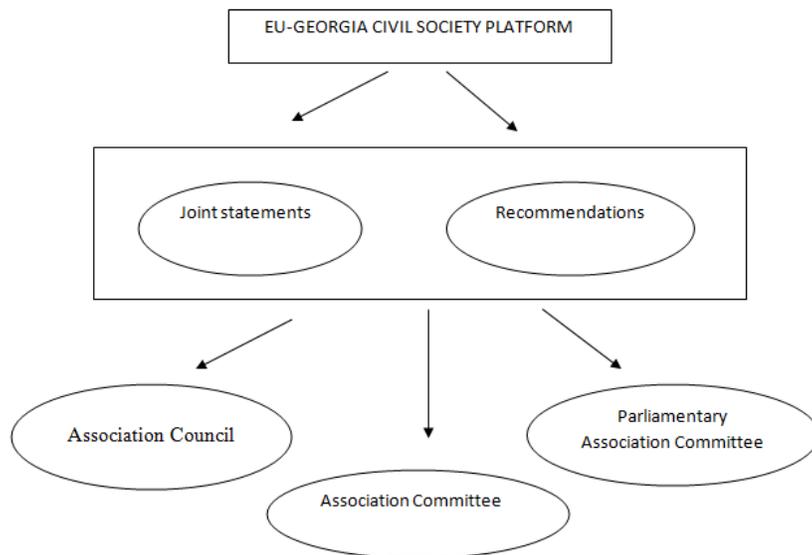
¹⁴ DCFTA Advisory Group meeting <http://www.economy.ge/?page=news&nw=213&s=ekonomikis-saministroshi-dcftas-sakonsultacio-jgufis-shexvedra-gaimarta>

¹⁵ Interview with Lia Todua, programme manager of momxmarebeli.ge at the Centre for Strategic Research and Development of Georgia

it was important for the platform's efficient functioning to have more expertise through the greater involvement of civil society actors.

The Civil Society Platform is an important mechanism for civil society both for active engagement in the process of Association Agreement implementation and a direct dialogue with the EU side. The Platform statute includes two basic tools, a general statement and drafting recommendations, by which it carries out its mandate (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.



It is noteworthy that the Civil Society Platform has direct mechanisms for engagement with the joint bodies established in the framework of the AA. These bodies are staffed by Georgian and EU representatives. Consequently, the CSP interacts with three main target groups: the Association Council, the Association Committee and the Association Parliamentary Committee.

The Association Council consists of members of the European Council, European Commission and Georgian Government representatives. It supervises and monitors implementation of the AA and meets at least once a year. As for the Association Committee, it assists the Association Council to perform its duties and functions.

The Association Committee consists of representatives of different parties, mainly at the level of high-ranking public officials. The Association Parliamentary Committee is a forum for the exchange of views and opinions between the members of the European Parliament and the

Parliament of Georgia. It is composed of members of the European Parliament and members of Parliament of Georgia.

The Association Agreement also provides that the Association Committee and the Parliamentary Association Committee shall establish regular contacts with the representatives of civil society, in order to obtain their views on the attainment of the AA objectives. However, according to the GNP co-chairman, Mr. Kakha Gogolashvili, no such consultations have been held so far.

On 16 June 2016, the CSP gathered in Georgia and adopted its rules of procedure.¹⁶ According to the rules of procedure, the GNP meets twice a year, which is quite inadequate and creates significant challenges for the GNP's efficient functioning.

Besides the general recommendations laid out in the joint statement, the CSP also prepares recommendations for association bodies and other political institutions. It should be noted that the CSP has developed two reports on equal opportunities¹⁷ for women and men in audiovisual media and the labour market, with recommendations for both the Georgian authorities and the EU.

According to Kakha Gogolashvili, GNP co-chairman, the above-mentioned platform is a very effective tool that facilitates civil society's participation not only on the national level but also beyond its borders.

“If there are issues that we cannot resolve with the Government or the Parliament, or if they do not engage in dialogue, then through this tool we will be able to bring up this issue directly with the Association Council. This platform is an even greater opportunity to assist civil society activities,” Kakha Gogolashvili said.¹⁸

It is important to mention the issue of funding the EU-Georgia platform, which has already created significant challenges for its proper functioning. The rules of procedure indicate that both Georgian and European sides will assume the necessary expenditures to ensure the participation of its members and secretariat in the CSP meetings. But the current practice shows that the first CSP meeting in Georgia was attended by only three of the nine European Union members, while the Georgian delegation could not attend the meeting in Brussels, which was postponed and held in February instead of December.

The financial sustainability of civil society in Georgia is a significant challenge; thus, ensuring adequate financial support is one of the strategic tasks in order to ensure that the CSP can carry out its activities at the appropriate level.

¹⁶ Rules of procedure http://eap-csf.ge/images/doc/rop_eng.pdf

¹⁷ Reports, http://eap-csf.ge/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=737&Itemid=1473&lang=en-GB

¹⁸ Interview with EU-Georgia Civil Society Forum co-chairman Kakha Gogolashvili, 8 June 2017.

Apart from the mechanisms and instruments provided by the Association Agreement, in Georgia there are other less formal coalitions that are also actively involved in the ongoing processes. These coalitions are mainly established by and combine NGOs with specific narrow competences. As a rule, they are more flexible. For example, such coalitions include the Coalition for Independent and Transparent Judiciary, Human Rights House, Georgian Association of Regional Broadcasters, Coalition for Equality, etc. It should also be noted that most of them are members of the GNP both as coalitions and constituent members.

In addition to establishing coalitions, civil society in Georgia has a good practice in advocacy campaigns through the formation of civil society movements. It is worth mentioning one of these campaigns – “This Affects You Too”. The movement first started in February 2012 and it has encompassed both civil society organisations and individual activists. In 2012, the goal of the campaign was to change electoral legislation through actively engaging citizens and creating a competitive, democratic pre-electoral environment. This goal was achieved, which was confirmed by the 2012 elections.

The campaign was revived in 2014 and continues till now, this time against secret eavesdropping and surveillance. The goal of the campaign is to change the legislation and practice of secret surveillance and to protect the constitutional guarantees of personal data, as well as the creation of a permanent independent investigative body to handle crimes committed by law-enforcement agencies. The campaign has already achieved some success, the movement has won a suit in the Constitutional Court, and in August 2014, significant positive changes initiated by the campaign were introduced into the law.

In order to summarise the complexity of civil involvement in the Association Agreement process with the EU, information about relevant legislative acts and civil engagement has been requested from various public agencies, including the Office of the State Minister of Georgia on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration. However, the government agencies replied that they do not have accurate statistical data about the number of meetings with civil society, as well as about CSO recommendations provided to and adopted by state bodies in the course of the AA implementation process.

Due to the above, the project team reviewed the implementation of the Action Plan 2014-2016 for the AA and the Association Agenda, which provide the implementation of all activities envisaged by the AA and examples of civil society participation in the process.

Although the AA Action Plan implementation reports provide information on civil society participation in specific activities, it should be noted that the information is quite fragmented, which does not provide valid and representative data for the assessment of civic engagement. Based on the Association Agenda, interviews and information requested from the state, it is possible to find approximate quantitative data about the meetings held with non-government

organisations. However, the qualitative analysis of the meetings is often very complicated, since the information is not properly documented. As the analysis demonstrated, there are no studies or reports that would assess the impact of civil engagement and its further impact on the lawmaking process. In addition, there is no systematisation and analysis of information on CSO involvement and participation. According to NGOs, the process of civic participation is often not systematic and planned but spontaneous, which significantly diminishes its effectiveness.

According to Archil Karaulashvili, Deputy State Minister of Georgia on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, civil involvement in the AA implementation process was fruitful and active. “The involvement was very fruitful, and many proposals of civil society have been adopted.”¹⁹

Experts estimate that the transparency level of civil participation and the association process has generally increased, but there are significant challenges associated with the involvement of CSOs in the process.

Considering the harmonisation of laws with the EU, it is particularly important to involve civil society in the lawmaking process. The roles of the Georgian Government and Parliament are strategically important in the process, as the absolute majority of the laws are developed by these two institutions. The Parliament of the 8th convocation adopted 1,505 laws in 2012-2016, out of which 865 laws were initiated by the Government, 440 laws were proposed by Parliament, 177 laws were submitted by parliamentary committees and the remaining 22 laws were initiated by other institutions.²⁰

According to Lika Sajaia,²¹ Parliamentary Secretary at Transparency International-Georgia, in cases where the laws were drafted by the Government, civil involvement was often very low; moreover, as the drafts used to be pre-agreed with the Government, it is even more difficult to reflect CSO remarks and proposals. Summarily expressed, this factor significantly complicates the situation.

One more important problem that experts often mention is the issue of time limits in the process of legislative changes. According to their assessment, very often the Parliament adopts laws in a hasty manner, including those prepared in the framework of the Association Agreement, which makes the NGO sector’s efficient involvement impossible. As for the Parliament of Georgia, Lika Sajaia of TI-Georgia states that it ensures better involvement of civil society, as the sessions are open and the agenda of parliamentary activities is well known in advance: “Civil society is proactive and ensures participation in the process by itself. Nevertheless, usually the Parliament

¹⁹ Interview with Archil Karaulashvili, Deputy State Minister of Georgia on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, 6 June 2017.

²⁰ Transparency International Georgia, *Performance of Parliament's 8th Convocation*, Tbilisi, 2015, http://www.transparency.ge/sites/default/files/post_attachments/parliamentary-work-report-2016-eng_0.pdf

²¹ Interview with Lika Sajaia, Parliamentary Secretary at Transparency International - Georgia, Tbilisi, 17 August 2017.

does not invite CSO representatives and is reluctant to set up joint thematic working groups to effectively utilise civil society expertise.”

According to Ivane Chkhikvadze,²² European Integration Programme Manager at the Open Society Georgia Foundation, since CSO involvement is directly prescribed by the Association Agreement, in most cases CSOs have to urge the authorities to express their readiness to hold consultations on various issues. However, there are cases when, in spite of intensive consultations and meetings, CSOs have been unable to influence the steps taken by the authorities. Lika Sajaia of TI-Georgia referred to the reform of the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia as one such case. Although a number of workshops were held between the Government and the non-government sector in the process, the former did not take into consideration many essential issues. Despite a high level of participation, civil society assesses the current legislative amendments in a negative light.²³

Along with the current challenges, problems exist within civil society and hinder its effectiveness. The most evident challenges are a lack of adequate knowledge and qualifications. As it was deduced by desk research and interviews with experts, only few CSOs have the capability to work steadily at a high level; in most cases, civil society lacks the resources necessary for sustainable and active work.

The desk research has shown that one of the problem's main sources is a constant attempt by NGOs to handle several unrelated issues simultaneously. Naturally, working in such a manner, they cannot attain narrow expertise on every specific matter. When talking about challenges, the issue of financial sustainability should not be omitted as most CSOs depend on donor funding and therefore should adapt to their priorities. CSOs participate in different grant competitions and therefore work fragmentarily on various topics, which in turn impedes the accumulation of knowledge on specific narrow issues.

As the Deputy State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Archil Karaulashvili, notes: “The [Georgian] Government and EU agreed to allocate 6 million euros to civil society to monitor the AA implementation. This is a very big sum and therefore we expect qualified analysis and recommendations from them, which is a great help for us. Nevertheless, there have been a number of occasions when different NGOs submit completely different, sometimes even diametrically opposite recommendations to the Government.”

²²Interview with Ivane Chkhikvadze, European Integration Programme manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation, Tbilisi, 7 June 2017.

²³Appeal of the Coalition for an Independent and Transparent Judiciary: The Parliament Adopts Legislative Amendments on Constitutional Court, which Threaten Democratic Development of Georgia (Tbilisi, 2016) <https://gyla.ge/en/post/parlamentis-mier-sakonstitucio-sasamartlostan-dakavshirebit-mighebuli-cvlilebebi-qveynis-demokratiul-ganvitarebas-saftrkhes-uqmnis#sthash.sQFelev7.dpbs>

Within the framework of the programme, a consortium consisting of five CSOs carries out the project “Civil Society Development Initiative”, which includes supporting CSO networking and cooperation in public policy monitoring and EU Association Agreement Advocacy.

It is noteworthy to mention the coalition supported by the Open Society Georgia Foundation, which has been continuously monitoring implementation of the AA since 2014. However, due to limited resources, it is unable to monitor all relevant sectors.

The study results show that more communication and close consultations—both between different CSOs and between civil society and the general public—are needed for strengthening the organisational capacity of CSOs. The existing challenges clearly indicate that more efforts by CSOs and authorities and closer cooperation between them are essential in order to strengthen civic participation in the policy cycle, which in turn renders the process more predictable and efficient.

Conclusion and recommendations

In Georgia, strengthening civic participation in decision making is closely linked to the European integration process. The development of civic participation culture and respective institutions is often included in all agreements and programmes that determine the agenda of relations between the EU and Georgia.

The two most important civil society platforms, which should provide structural dialogue between civil society and authorities on the most crucial issues of the country's development, have been created within the framework of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement and the EU Eastern Partnership Programme. Together with efforts by the EU, it is important to note the increased willingness of the Georgian Government to cooperate with civil society on various issues. This is evidenced by the memorandums of cooperation signed by the Georgian National Platform with the Government of Georgia and the European Integration Committee of the Parliament, as well as by similar memorandums separately signed by other coalitions and CSOs operating in Georgia. Nevertheless, often the intensity and forms of civic participation do not determine civil society's influence on politics. The authorities often neglect civil society's views and recommendations in relation to a number of issues.

Despite significant progress, various complex challenges still remain that are associated with the sustainability and efficiency of civic participation. The authorities often lack a uniform systematic approach to civic engagement and participation in the implementation of the policy cycle. Additionally, CSOs do not have equal opportunities to actively participate in political decision-making even on acute public problems, which is not good practice.

It is noteworthy that, in most cases, the impact and effectiveness of civil participation have not been assessed, nor have the relevant statistical data and the critical analysis and evaluation of the process been carried out, which would have significantly enhanced the efficiency of the process.

Still, developing adequate skills and qualifications for both civil servants and civil society organisations remains a challenge, which impedes civil society participation from becoming as consistent and targeted as possible.

It is noteworthy that ensuring the necessary financial resources for active civil involvement and participation is one of the strategic issues that should be given more attention by both the Government and civil society. As the study reveals, in some cases, a lack of necessary financial resources makes it impossible to carry out very important activities, which negatively affects the civil participation process.

For an effective response to the existing challenges, it is crucial to have strong political will on the part of the Government to increase opportunities for civil society involvement in policy planning, implementation and monitoring. On the other hand, it is important to further deepen cooperation between various civil society organisations and increase their capacities in order to elaborate and introduce the most effective instruments of civic participation in political decision-making based on broad public discussions.

Recommendations for civil society

- Strengthening internal coordination and cooperation in order to enhance expertise and feedback;
- Ensuring closer links with those public and professional groups whose interests they represent;
- Enhancing cooperation between different civil society platforms;
- Strengthening coordination and cooperation with civil society organisations of Eastern Partnership countries and EU member states;
- Ensuring equal quality of expertise in terms of WG representation through capacity building activities, involvement of new CSOs, involvement of international organisations and EU partner organisations;
- Ensuring more regular communication with the EU Delegation and EU institutions;
- Providing civil society organisations with more information and training on civic participation tools and methods;
- Developing mechanisms of closer communication and greater exchange of information between various civil society organisations in order to conduct appropriate joint preparatory works aimed at drastically enhancing the quality of bilateral meetings;
- Commencing active discussions on mechanisms for strengthening civil society's financial sustainability, including the possibilities of funding from the state budget;

- Improving communication of the Georgia-EU Civil Society Platform with the EU-Georgia Association Council, Association Committee and Association Parliamentary Committee;
- Ensuring more efficient utilisation of the Association Platform and EU Eastern Partnership capabilities by CSOs for more intensive participation in advocacy campaigns, lobbying and political decision-making.

Recommendations for Government

- Providing public servants and individual decision-makers with more information and training on civic participation tools and methods;
- Developing mechanisms of closer communication and greater exchange of information with civil society organisations in order to enhance the quality of bilateral meetings;
- Ensuring civil society participation not only in the area of policy monitoring and evaluation, but also in policy planning and implementation, which will facilitate better decisions;
- Strengthening by the government of cooperation with civil society, especially in those spheres where civil society can provide significant assistance (research, awareness raising, expert analysis, etc.);
- Developing relevant statistics related to civic participation in order to assess its results and improve existing practices;
- Providing feedback to the GNP's recommendation in order to significantly improve the memorandum of cooperation signed between the GNP and the Government;
- Creating working groups involving CSOs by parliamentary committees; providing them with purposeful information and ensuring their involvement in the lawmaking process;
- Introducing the practice of preliminary work meetings with civil society to discuss draft laws initiated by the authorities in order to ensure feedback and efficient participation of civil society;
- Drafting by the Parliament of an annual, time-framed action plan for the legislative harmonisation process with the EU to ensure appropriation of reasonable time for discussing draft laws, as well as better transparency and proper civil participation;
- Conducting joint consultations and ensuring coordinated efforts of cooperation with donor organisations by the Government and civil society;
- Starting discussions about the possibilities of funding CSOs through the state budget of Georgia.

Recommendations for the EU

- Intensifying efforts to facilitate cooperation of Georgian CSOs, on the one hand, with Eastern Partnership countries' CSOs and on the other hand, with the EU member states' civil society.

- Ensuring financial assistance to the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform;
- Introducing opportunities for institutional assistance in order to strengthen the sustainability of CSOs;
- Improving communication and cooperation between the EU representation in Georgia and civil society in the process of policy elaboration;
- Strengthening the tripartite EU-Government-CSO cooperation format;
- Creating an additional format of participation for CSOs representing both sides at the EU-Georgia Association Council meeting;
- Ensuring the development of a format of regular meetings with EaP countries.