



Structured consultation on the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020

CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE

Country Report: Belarus

This report offers the perspectives of Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum member organisations from Belarus on the future of the Eastern Partnership following its tenth anniversary year. It is one of a series of six country reports, with other editions covering Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The findings presented here are the result of a comprehensive process of internal consultation, conducted in October 2019 in order to inform the EaP CSF's response to DG NEAR's structured consultation on the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020.

The official DG NEAR consultation addressed the fields of 'Economic and Human Capital Development', 'Good Governance, Rule of Law, Security Cooperation', 'Development of Bilateral and Multilateral Partnership with the EU and among EaP Countries', 'Improving Strategic Communication and Visibility', and 'Other Areas'. For the purposes of its own internal consultation, the EaP CSF chose to organise these fields into the following themes:

1. Economic and Human Capital Development
2. Good Governance, Rule of Law, Security Cooperation
3. EU-EaP and Intra-EaP Cooperation: Ensuring Inclusiveness and Differentiation
4. Boosting EU Visibility in the EaP Region
5. Strengthening the Role of Civil Society

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Structured Consultation on Eastern Partnership

The civil society perspective: Country Report **Belarus**

SUMMARY

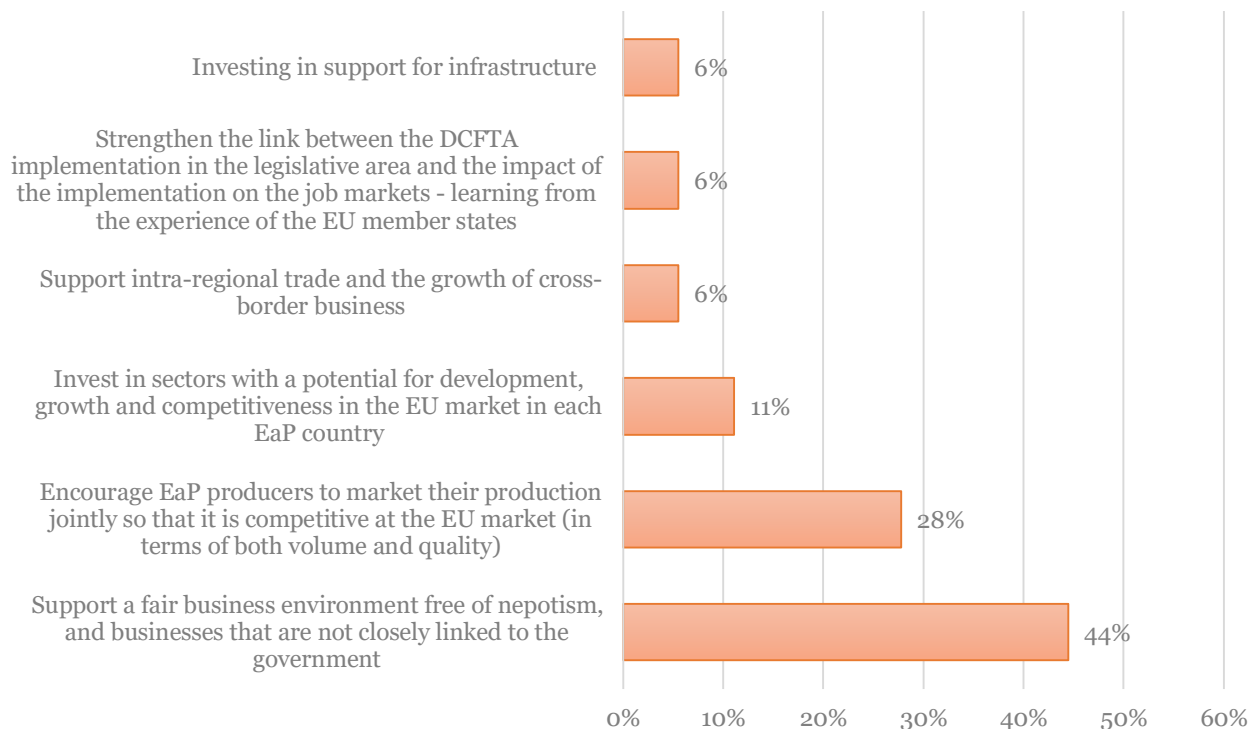
The EaP CSF prepared its response to DG NEAR's structured consultation on the future of the Eastern Partnership by launching a comprehensive process of internal consultation of its membership base. The internal consultation was based on three pillars: six in-country focus groups, four online focus groups and one online questionnaire combining qualitative and quantitative elements. Over 200 civil society organisations participated in at least one pillar of the consultation. The results presented below offer a **detailed overview of the input received from Belarus**. A total of 33 Belarusian civil society organisations participated in the consultation process (one or more pillars): 19 took part in the online survey, 12 in the in-country focus group, and 2 in the online focus groups.

1. ECONOMIC AND HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

The results of the online survey of Belarusian organisations suggest the most urgent and effective measure through which the EU should promote sustainable economic development in the EaP region is **supporting a fair business environment free of nepotism, and businesses that are not closely linked to the government** (44%). 28% of respondents also opted for **encouraging EaP producers to market their production jointly so that it is competitive in the EU market** (in terms of both volume and quality). The need for maximum prioritisation of such measures also emerged from the in-country focus group results. Support to the Belarusian economy must to be smart-targeted towards sectors with competitiveness potential but also towards innovative products and high added-value industries and sectors. The EU should continue to offer incentives to introduce policies establishing a fair business environment, levelling the field for competition, and strengthening and increasing the share of the private sector in the economy of Belarus.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In your opinion, what would be the most urgent and effective measure that the EU should promote to support sustainable economic development in the EaP region?



Supporting sectors with a potential for development, growth and competitiveness in the EU single market

- Support the IT sector, tourism, agriculture, start-up industries and venture financing mechanisms focusing in particular on the development of clean technologies and the circular economy, the harmonisation of digital space and digital markets, industrialisation 4.0, and innovation.
- Provide training on EU certification and standardisation.
- Facilitate the access of Belarusian goods to the EU market, help businesses to integrate into the European and global markets, support the diversification of the economy, and facilitate cooperation between businesses in the EaP countries.

Supporting SMEs

- Assist with the development of educational programmes for SME associations to enhance their professionalism, including the development and implementation of advocacy strategies.
- Support SMEs' connections with EU and EaP enterprises, fostering greater efforts in standardisation, harmonisation and mutual recognition of the conformity of goods, to enable increased market access and simplify trade procedures.

- Support SMEs by investing into projects in the IT sector, innovation and biotechnology, and cluster development via EU4Business.
- Include a wide package of instruments such as micro-lending and various other forms of support for small and medium-sized businesses, ensuring the availability of credit resources at affordable rates close to European ones.

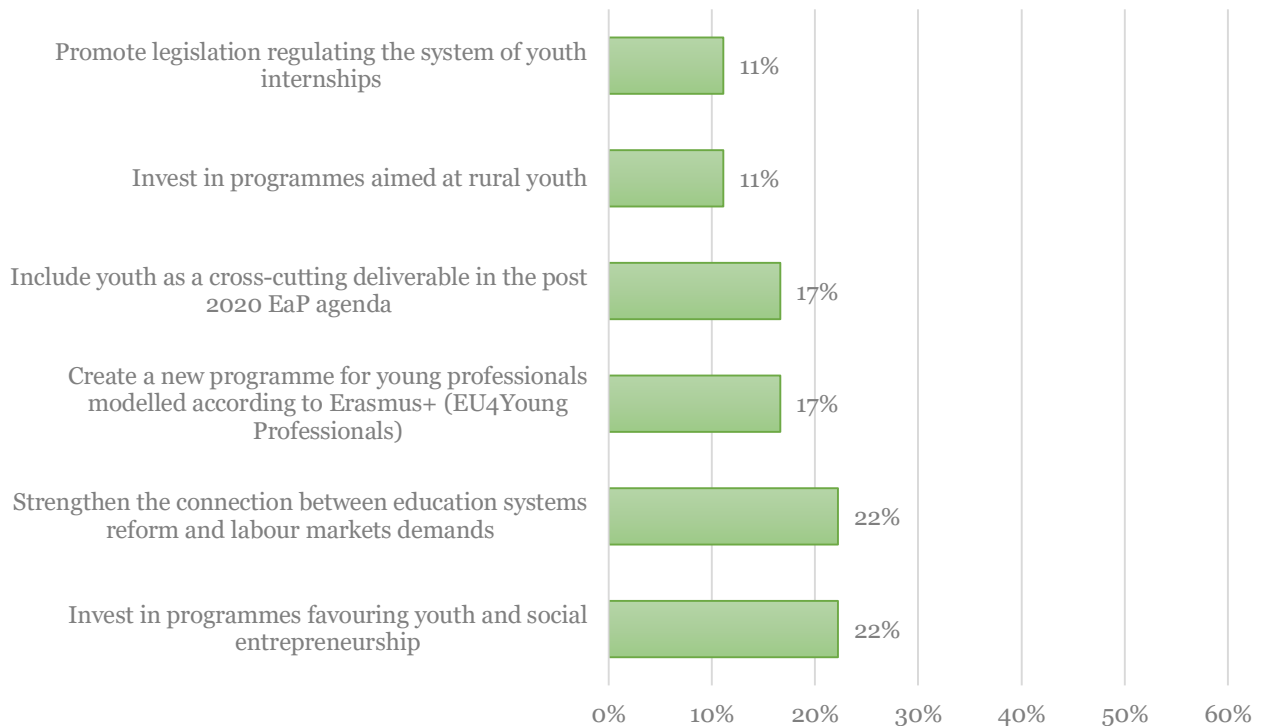
Implementation of reforms

- Encourage structural reforms and introduce the principles of the market economy.
- Develop the private sector, for example through joint projects on specific innovations, and channel funds to private companies, instead of fully or partially state-owned ones.
- Support the increased capacity of independent organisations in the field of economic research and consulting.
- Support the development of an insurance pensions system and facilitate the entrance of relevant European insurance companies into the local market.
- Ensure monitoring and risk assessment of the implementation of EU regulations in the Belarusian economy (e.g. carbon tax).
- Promote approaches that would reduce the economic and financial risks for people willing to try their hand at business in the regions of Belarus.
- Focus on medium term priorities for the development of:
 - digital transformation
 - public administration and transition to e-government
 - digital literacy
 - cyber security and protecting personal data
 - citizens' and civil society's influence on urban development processes (Smart City), urban development based on the "bottom-up" principle (example - SymbioCity in Brest), and incentivisation of stakeholders from various sectors into urban development
 - circular economy approaches
 - business-oriented programs (for example, co-financing) for citizens and municipalities with low risks (which could be taken by banking institutions)
 - a European-Belarusian investment pool, which would mix the interests of European and Belarusian finance and foster cooperation with technology parks and university R&D departments.

Some 22% of Belarusian respondents to the online survey suggest the most urgent and effective measure the EU should support in order to empower young people further and address the economic challenges they are facing is to **invest in programmes favouring youth and social entrepreneurship**. Equally preferred was **strengthening the connection between education systems reform and labour market demands** (22%).

HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

What would be the most urgent and effective measure that the EU should promote to further empower youth and address the economic challenges they are facing? (you can choose only one)

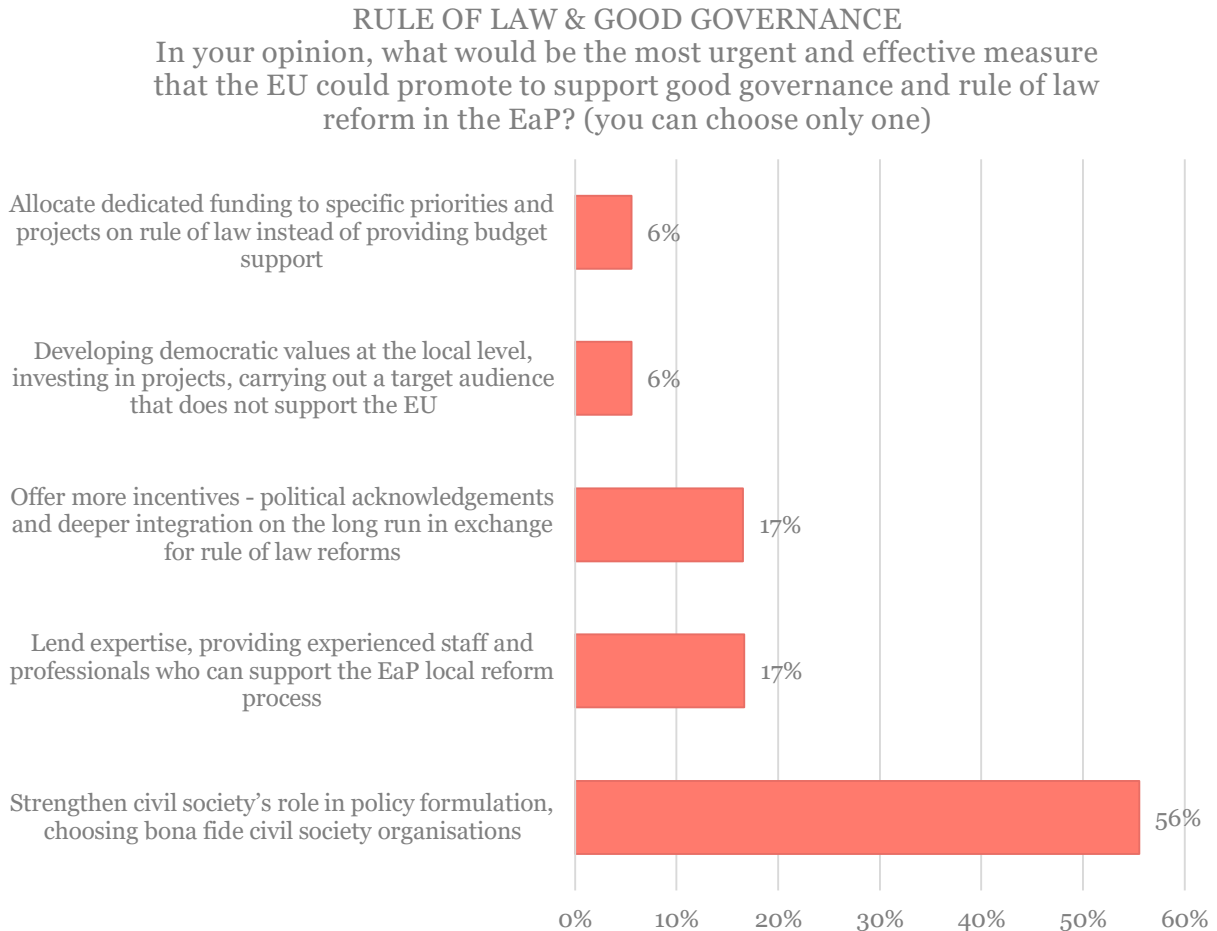


Education, Youth entrepreneurship and Labour Market

- Assist in reforming the education system, developing democratic, ethnographic, cultural and historical values, and human rights. Introduce non-formal education in various fields of science, creativity, art, politics. Provide more educational opportunities for young people in local languages.
- Fight nepotism and injustices in youth employment.
- Promote youth participation in regional and local decision-making, and develop public-private dialogue.
- Support youth entrepreneurship, particularly at the regional and local levels, through special programmes focused on youth empowerment and business education, and dedicated youth entrepreneurship centres.
- Stimulate research aimed at identifying effective models of business education for youth in the regions.
- Reach out beyond the 'usual suspects' to promote young people's participation in the Erasmus+ programme.
- Ease conditions for receiving international aid and foreign funding for CSOs, including youth organisations.

2. GOOD GOVERNANCE, RULE OF LAW, SECURITY COOPERATION

In order to support good governance and rule of law reforms in the EaP countries, the majority of respondents in Belarus (56%) suggest the EU should focus on **strengthening the role of bona fide civil society organisations in policy formulation**. According to the survey, the EU should also strengthen **measures and tools supporting the sharing of expertise, providing experienced staff, experts and professionals who can support the EaP local reform process** (17%).



Rule of Law

- Push for increased collaboration between the government and civil society organisations; prevent further downgrading of the status of bona fide CSOs and the EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform and the presence of GONGOs at official meetings.
- Support CSOs and independent think tanks in developing proposals for legislative changes in areas that require reform.
- Elaborate a clear definition of a 'sharp deterioration in the rule of law', including criteria for defining it and a procedure for quickly responding to it.

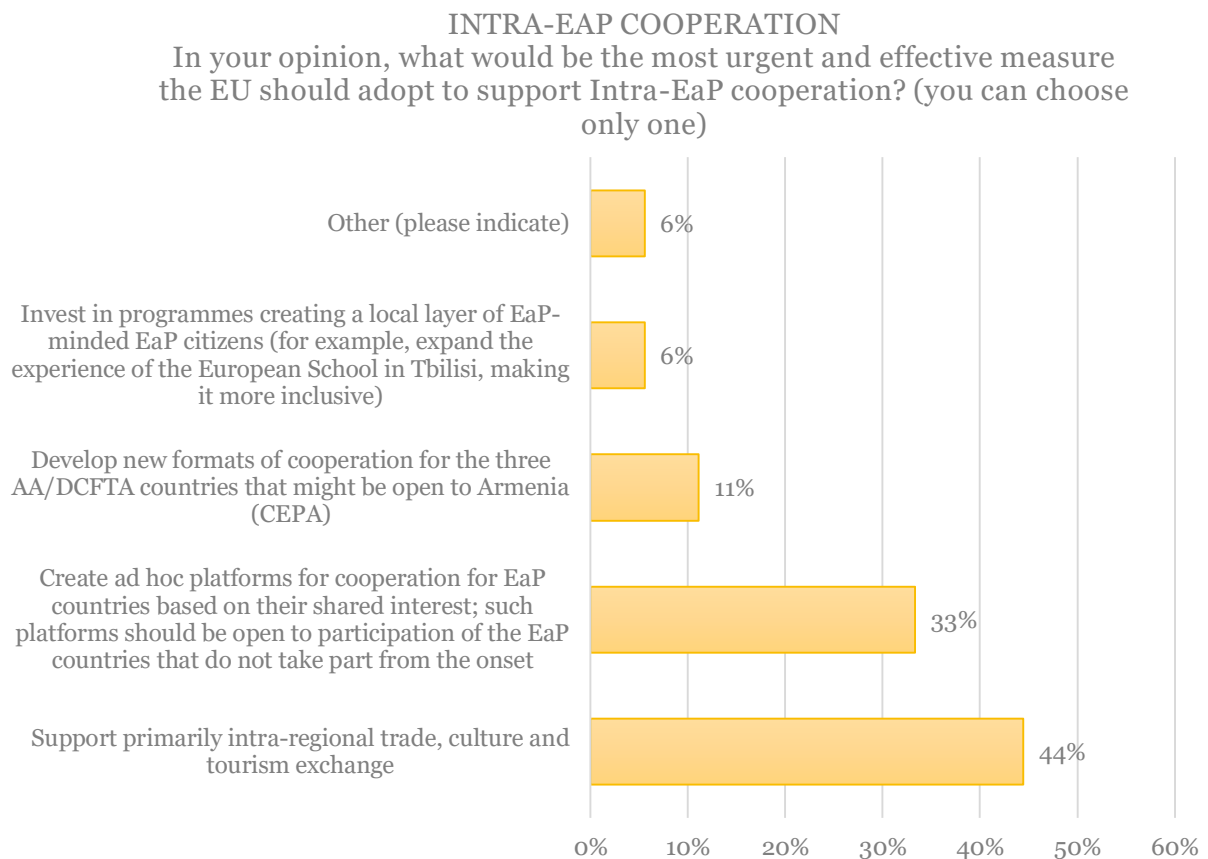
- Establish systemic indicators of progress and a checklist for consistency in human rights, good governance and democracy related policies; avoid considering decorative and rhetorical achievements – for example, governmental consultations with civil society which do not lead to any results – as progress.
- Facilitate dialogue between the authorities and civil society on the implementation of human rights standard and improvements. Ensure a coherent approach to the deterioration of the human rights situation. Improve the quality and the efficiency of human rights programmes, including those for civil servants (judges, prosecutors etc.); inform civil society about existing programmes and open participation to civil society representatives.
- Strengthen the work of the EU Delegation to Belarus, including through the creation of effective and fast consultation mechanisms with civil society organisations defending human rights.
- Promote the liberalisation of foreign funding regulations, lobby for comprehensive improvements in the civil society and media environments (registration and accreditation procedures), and promote the role of civil society organisations as monitors and watchdogs for bilateral and regional programmes and projects via instruments such as CSO Meter or the Eastern Partnership Index.
- Promote tools for open decision-making and transparency in funding flows. Support the Belarusian authorities in establishing a special service monitoring the distribution of EU financial resources, with regional departments across the country. Monitoring systems would also be beneficial in other areas, such as commissions in the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection for improving the country's pension system.
- Advocate for the reforming of the judicial system, prioritising the independence of the courts from the executive.

Security and hybrid threats

- Develop media literacy programmes for various target audiences, increase media literacy through the educational system and through the work of CSOs in cooperation with government agencies and state media, as well as independent media working on countering propaganda.
- Ensure the authorities guarantee the implementation of the principles of personal data protection, accountability and transparency of online services. Consider the risks that might be generated by the increase of the state's cyber security capabilities, including more pressure on civil society and the opposition, greater violation of human rights, and even the strengthening of the dictatorship.

3. EU-EAP AND INTRA-EAP COOPERATION: ENSURING INCLUSIVENESS AND DIFFERENTIATION

According to 44% of respondents to the survey, inclusiveness and differentiation in EaP relations with the EU should be pursued by **supporting primarily intra-regional trade, culture and tourism exchanges**. The second most chosen option was to **establish ad hoc platforms for cooperation for EaP countries** based on their shared interests, and open participation in such platforms to any EaP country (33%).



Boosting intra-EaP cooperation

- Ensure the participation of civil society in the implementation of multilateral programmes focused on regional infrastructure and cross-border projects related to environment and energy, transport, security and infrastructure. Multilateral programmes are considered successful but currently do not include CSOs in their implementation.
- Reinforce cooperation between countries at the horizontal level within projects such as EU4Climate, and include civil society representatives in expert evaluations.
- Support projects and ideas developed jointly by EaP-based young people in the field of regional cooperation at EaP youth events, ensuring the implementation of these projects in each EaP country.

- Facilitate the development of multilateral programmes aimed at promoting European values and the adoption of European quality standards in the areas of education and cultural development.
- Support civil society organisations in joint international and regional (EaP) advocacy campaigns.
- Continue support for projects with a regional cooperation dimension, such as the EU's Mayors for Economic Growth initiative, Twin Cities, Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy.

Supporting regionalisation in selected areas

- Ensure cooperation in the field of pension systems, taking into consideration the 2002 Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), and support umbrella social structures that include organisations from EaP and EU countries.
- Facilitate the creation of cross-border joint projects in the field of mechanical engineering (Belarus-Ukraine), energy (production of solar panels, wind farms, batteries for electric cars) and in the development of innovative technologies.
- Prioritise EaP regional development and the region's position in the global economy, in particular focusing on responsible consumption of local resources and sustainable development principles.

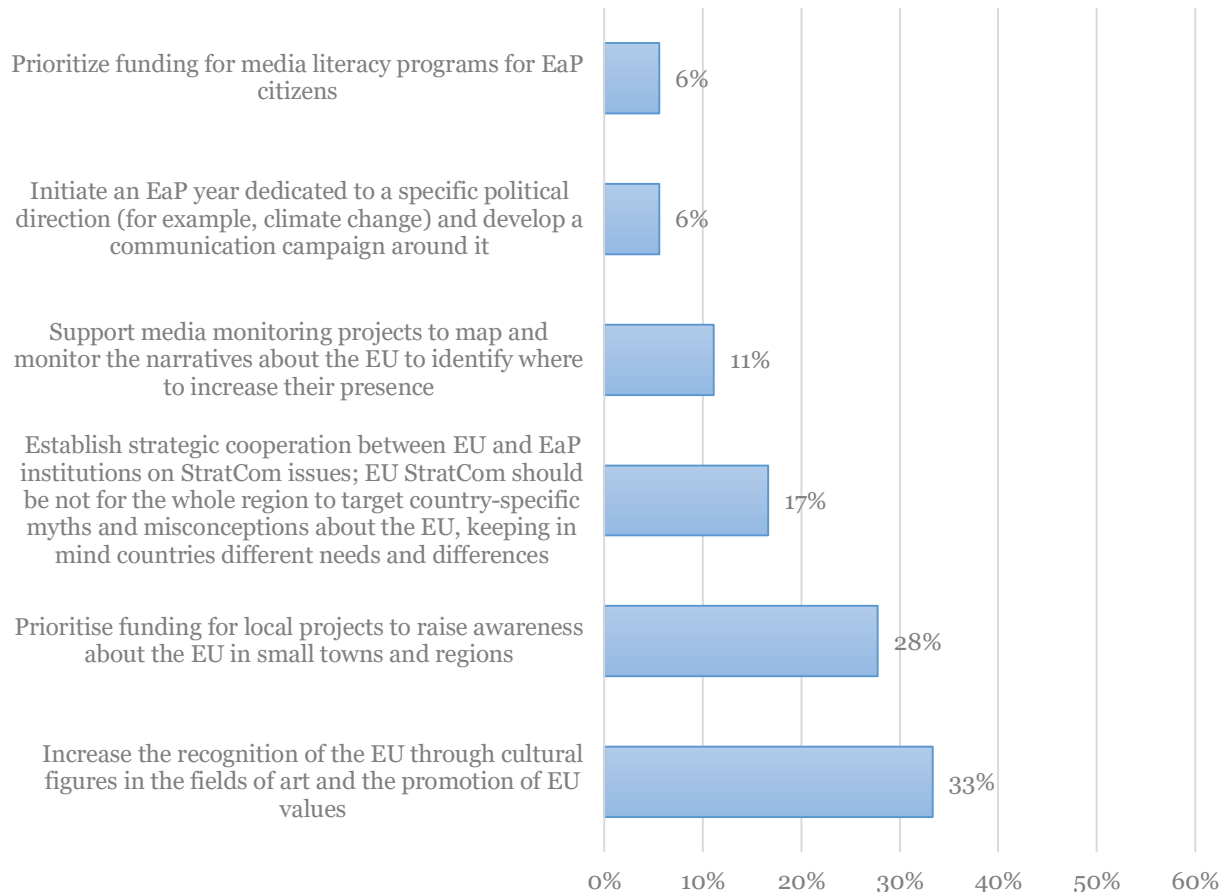
4. BOOSTING EU VISIBILITY IN THE EAP REGION

The results of the online survey of Belarusian organisations suggest the most urgent and effective measure that the EU should support to enhance the visibility of the EU in the EaP region is **increasing the recognition of the EU through cultural figures in the fields of art and the promotion of EU values** (chosen by 38% of respondents). This was followed by **prioritising funding for local projects to raise awareness about the EU in small towns and regions** (28%) and **establishing strategic cooperation between EU and EaP institutions on StratCom issues**; EU StratCom should focus more on country-specific myths and misconceptions about the EU, keeping in mind countries' different needs and specificities (17%).



EU VISIBILITY IN EAP COUNTRIES

In your opinion, what would be the most urgent and effective measure to enhance the visibility of the EU in the EaP region? (you can choose only one)



Increasing EU visibility

- Identify regional social media channels (Telegram channels, groups on social networking sites, local city activist sites, etc.) and feed factually correct European content, mirroring the practice widely used by pro-Russian propaganda.
- Promote the image of the EU through creative formats for interaction with specific target audiences, such as street art festivals (following the example of “Vulica Brazil” by the Brazilian Embassy), the restoration of small urban spaces, and the development of local entertainment content on TV and the internet to counterbalance Russian entertainment formats. Other initiatives could include providing public support for positive advocacy campaigns, and the public celebration of the EU member states’ days of culture (following the best practice set by the National Day of Sweden). Representatives of the EU member states’ embassies should personally involve themselves in the planning and implementation of socially significant initiatives together with local activists, and actively participate in the events. Light advertising on the facades of buildings (like

the ‘10 years of EaP’ promo in Minsk), banners on “Sustainable Development Goals” along the roads, banners with the results of individual EU projects on the streets of Minsk, distribution of booklets, EU flags, etc. are not the best examples, as they might remind citizens of Soviet or current government propaganda.

- Disseminate information about successful projects implemented by the EU in Belarus and the EaP region, and at the same time provide space for public critical assessment of project shortcomings.
- Keep developing projects which build on the experience of EU member states in Belarus, such as the COMGOR project (Communal governance in cities: communication and governance for public involvement in urban management in Belarus).
- Build on recent progress towards visa policy liberalisation, in order to make educational exchange programmes with EU member states easier, including Erasmus+ projects, internships abroad, cultural exchanges.

Working with media

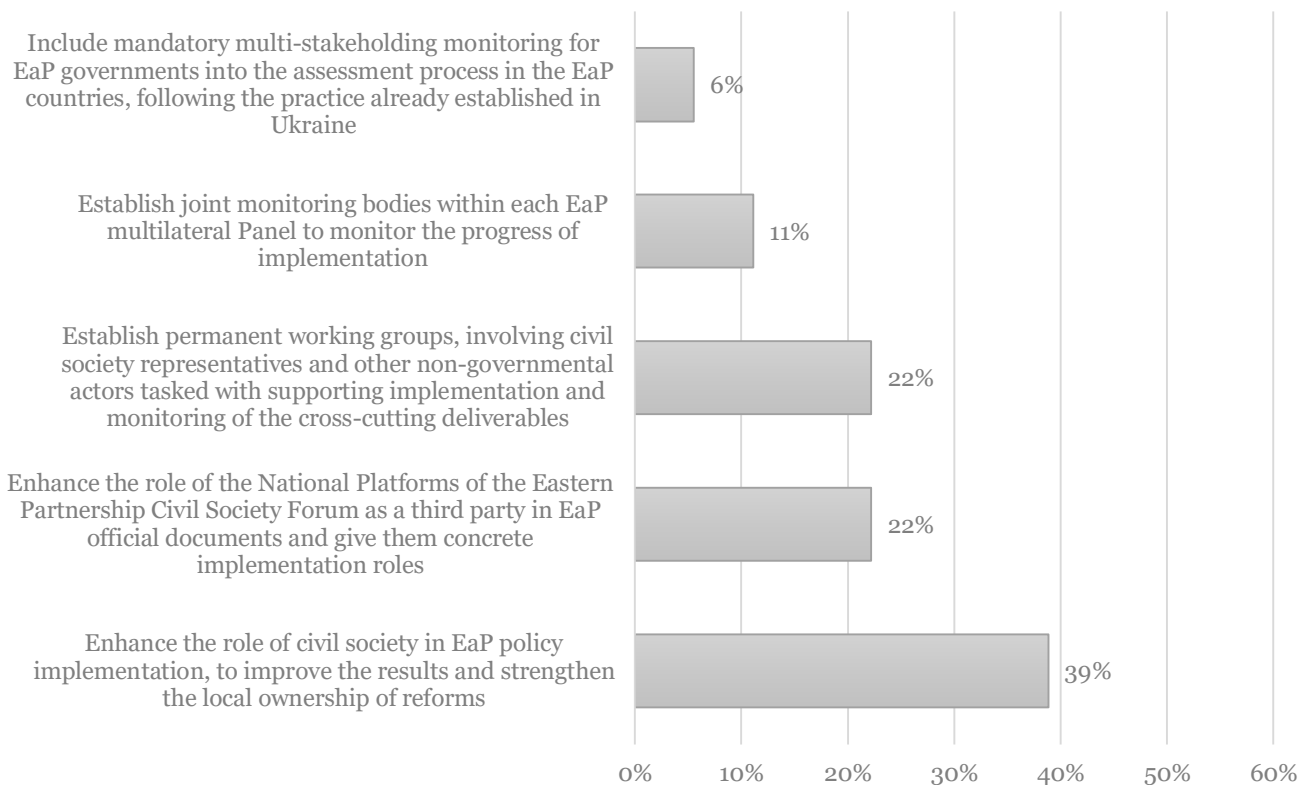
- Support the liberalisation of conditions for the independent media.
- Support the expansion of the free broadcasting of European TV channels in Belarus; currently, Belarusians have access, free-of-charge, to 20 Russian channels and to only one European news channel - Euronews.
- Promote the production of high-quality national content in the education sector and the media and/or subsidize the adaptation and broadcast of European content to the territory of Belarus (including entertainment, educational, professional, and documentary channels).
- Standardise the research method for media monitoring in EaP countries, include content analysis, and take into consideration the data of different media monitoring already available and carried out by independent think tanks and media associations, too.
- Support and disseminate successful examples of independent thematic media created by civil society (for example, the Belarusian Green Portal and others).

5. STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Some 39% of Belarusian respondents to the survey pointed to the need to **enhance the role of civil society in EaP policy implementation, to improve the results and strengthen the local ownership of reforms**. The second measure that the EU should take to strengthen civil society is to **enhance the role of National Platforms of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum as a third party in EaP official documents and give them concrete implementation roles** (22%). Equally preferred was **establishing permanent working groups, involving civil society representatives and other non-governmental actors, tasked with supporting the implementation and monitoring of cross-cutting deliverables** (22%).

STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

What would be the most urgent and effective measure to increase civil society's involvement in the EaP policy? (you can choose only one)



Enabling environment for civil society

- Promote civil society's access to the implementation of programmes and projects with the participation of government agencies. Support the activities and capacity building of pro-European CSOs.
- Recognise the EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform as the main representative of civil society in dialogue with the central government within the EaP framework.
- Provide more active support to advocacy campaigns implemented by CSOs - for

example, campaigns on free elections (electoral reform, implementation of international principles to ensure free and transparent elections), on freedom of peaceful assembly, or against the death penalty.

Facilitating access to funding

- Make a clear distinction between independent CSOs and GONGOs, which often receive more funding than independent organisations.

Improving technical support

- Strengthen the EaP CSF in its capacity as a training and resource centre, and as a platform for ‘people’s diplomacy’ by being vocal about its role and the need for it to be accepted by the authorities.
- Contribute to increasing the competencies of civil society leaders and future leaders, as well as the soft skills and organisational capacity of CSOs.
- Provide opportunities and start-up funding for growth and development of small CSOs – not just to those with proven experience and grant history.
- Increase support to joint projects between CSOs from the EaP countries and EU member states.

ANNEX – SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum's contribution to DG NEAR's Structured Consultation is a synthesis of a comprehensive process of internal consultation of the Forum's membership base. The consultation was based on a methodology especially conceived to distill recommendations that would: (i) have a regional dimension while preserving country specificities; (ii) give a clear sense of prioritisation; (iii) be the result of a debate among civil society experts with complementary expertise on cross-sectoral areas; and (iv) ensure a high number of contributions to ensure the recommendations' legitimacy, as well as country and expertise balance.

Within the elaborated methodology, three different but complementary mechanisms were used to gather the collective input of EaP CSF member CSOs from the six EaP countries and the EU:

- *six national in-person focus groups*, to debate and formulate recommendations featuring each EaP country's national perspective on EaP and national priorities;
- *four online focus groups*, to formulate regional, thematic recommendations featuring experts with different profiles, but the same areas of specialism, from the EaP countries and the EU
- *one online survey*, intended as the most inclusive segment of the consultation, adding a quantitative element to the methodology that enabled the prioritisation of policy recommendations.

All three segments were conducted in October 2019 and involved over 200 experts.

The input from the segments was used to put together a synthesis report based on major common patterns that emerged across the focus groups and the online survey. The results of the survey and focus groups were also segmented by country and further distilled into dedicated country reports.

National in-person' focus groups

The national focus groups were designed to capture in-country perspectives and country-specific recommendations. Six focus groups were conducted in October 2019 – one in each of the EaP states – with a total of 68 participants. Each discussion lasted for about four hours and was aimed at gathering the input of a group of EaP CSF member organisations, with balanced yet diverse expertise, on a set of questions formulated around the structure of DG NEAR's Structured Consultation – i.e. four clusters of questions built around one scenario each. Each focus group followed the same protocol, built around four scenarios and containing a set of mandatory and optional questions that national FG facilitators could select from. Questions were formulated for national-level discussions to allow the aggregation of a balanced set of recommendations for the EU based on:

- Identifying current policy practices, actions and deliverables that the EU should retain in its post-2020 policy framework and ineffective or counter-productive practices which should be discontinued;
- Identifying new policy practices, actions and deliverables the EU could initiate;

- Testing policy ideas and actions already identified by the EaP CSF in previous rounds of internal consultations, or proposed as part of its existing written output (c.f. “Advancing Eastern Partnership: 23 Civil society ideas for the policy beyond 2020” policy paper);
- Identifying processes and policies that the EaP CSF should advocate further;
- Identifying umbrella recommendations as well as concrete policy actions that the EU could adopt.

Each focus group’s facilitator prepared an analytical report of the discussions and submitted it to the methodology expert who used the six summary reports in the drafting of the synthesis report.

Online focus groups

Online focus groups captured thematic recommendations in a regional discussion, and were open to both EaP and EU civil society experts. Four online focus groups were conducted in October 2019. These addressed the following thematic areas:

- FG1: Economic development
- FG2: Human capital development
- FG3: Good governance, rule of law, and security
- FG4: Civil society engagement

Each focus group hosted 5-10 civil society experts – 24 in total – all of whom are active within the working groups of the EaP CSF with relevant professional background and expertise specific to the thematic area discussed. Each focus group hosted a one-hour discussion on a set of 7-9 questions, which addressed each thematic cluster from a regional perspective. Questions were formulated to allow aggregation of a set of recommendations at regional level for the EU, based on the same logic and criteria as the in-person focus groups elaborated above. Furthermore, questions sought to build upon and complement the key findings from the national focus groups with regional recommendations, as well as to triangulate the conclusions of overlapping discussions.

Four summary reports were produced as a result of the online focus groups, and used in the drafting of the final synthesis report. These included a general set of recommendations as well as one for each question asked in a summary form. When drafting the summary recommendations, the following questions were asked to guide the narrative: *What patterns emerge from the discussions? What are the common themes across the EaP region? What new policy actions could the EU pursue beyond 2020? Can these be generalised for the region based on the focus group discussions?*

Online survey

The online survey was conceived as the most inclusive segment of the consultation, adding a quantitative element to the methodology that enabled the prioritisation of policy recommendations. One general online questionnaire complemented the focus groups. The survey was offered in two languages, English and Russian, and it was made available to all six partner countries of the Eastern Partnership, as well as to EaP CSF member organisations based in EU

member states. A total of 160 representatives of EaP CSF member organisations filled out the online questionnaire from 3rd to 14th October 2019.

The survey asked a mix of 15 open-ended and closed questions (+2 identification questions) grouped into six themes, following the structure of DG NEAR's Structured Consultation questionnaire:

- a. Economic development (Q1, Q2)
- b. Human capital development (Q3, Q4)
- c. Good governance, rule of law, and security (Q5, Q6, Q7)
- d. Intra-EaP cooperation (Q8, Q9)
- e. EU visibility in the EaP region (Q10, Q11)
- f. EU support to civil society (Q12, Q13, Q14)
- g. Other (Q15)

An online survey report was produced which synthesized the 160 responses of the EaP CSF member organisations into summaries of recommendations per question asked. All responses in English and Russian were individually analysed and grouped at the national level first. These were then clustered to identify regional and thematic patterns across the six EaP partner countries. The summaries of recommendations provided for each of the questions thus reflect common patterns identified across the region, and are presented in the form of recommendations for the EU.

More Information

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) is a unique multi-layered regional civil society platform aimed at promoting European integration, facilitating reforms and democratic transformations in the six Eastern Partnership countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Serving as the civil society and people-to-people dimension of the Eastern Partnership, the EaP CSF strives to strengthen civil society in the region, boost pluralism in public discourse and policy making by promoting participatory democracy and fundamental freedoms. For more information, please visit the EaP CSF website at www.eap-csf.eu