COVID-19's potential for change in the EaP countries

EaP CSF COVID-19 POLICY PAPER

#PrepareEaP4Health

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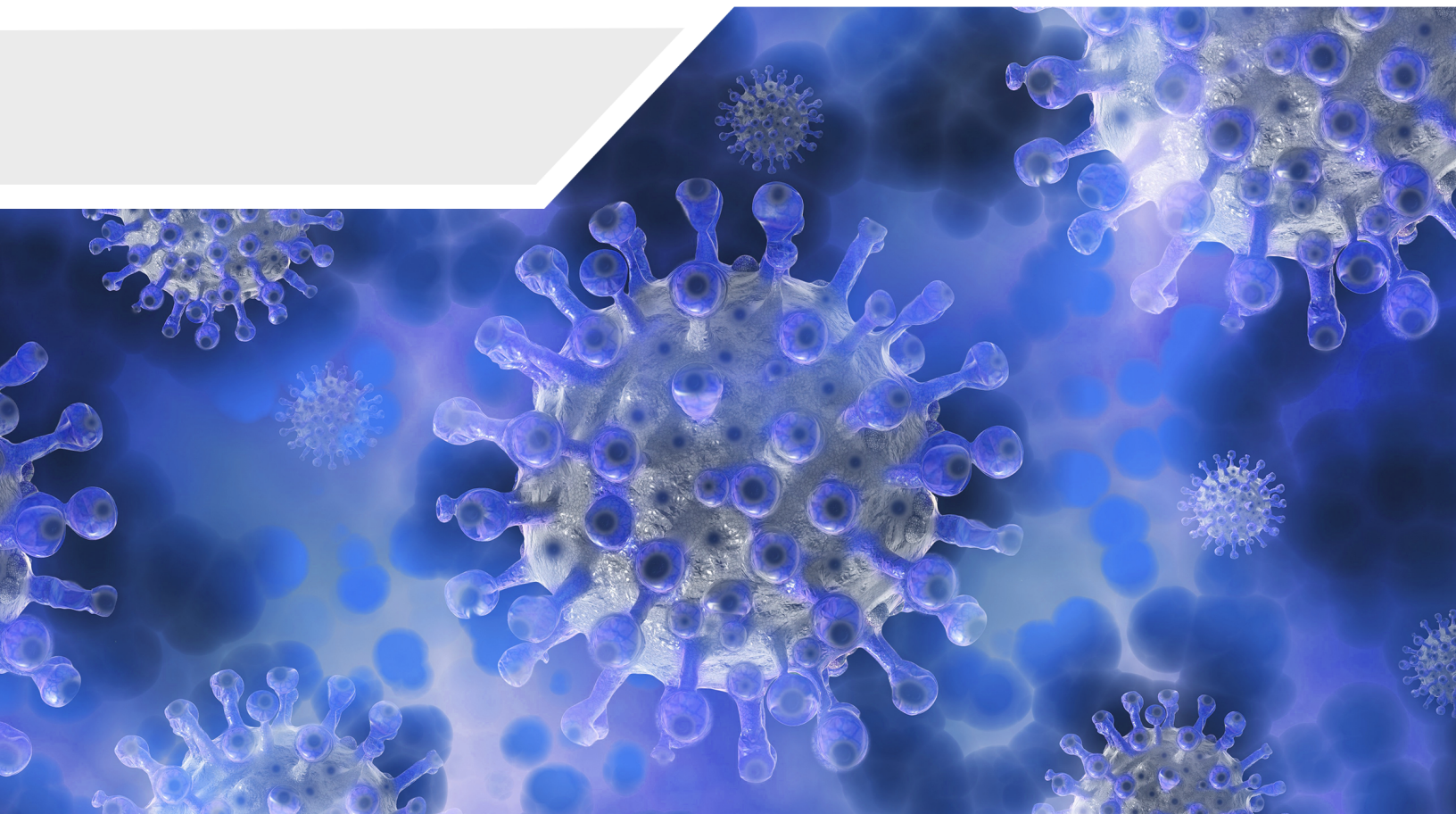
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CSO – civil society organisation
EaP – Eastern Partnership
EU – European Union
ICT – Information and Communications Technology
SME – Small and Medium Sized Enterprise

Preface: COVID-19 as a governance test

The COVID-19 crisis has significantly affected the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, having interconnected consequences involving central and local authorities, businesses, and civil society, and affecting previous collaborative arrangements between the public and private sectors.

Local authorities were forced to find prompt and solutions-oriented responses to the multiple challenges posed by the pandemic. Their successes and failures were largely predetermined by their capacity to organise and direct the activities of the relevant public sector domains, including healthcare, education, and social services, yet the outcomes were also decided in no small part by personal and contextual factors, and not merely by the performance of the multi-stakeholder governance framework.

COVID-19 was a significant stressor for labour migration dynamics in the region. On the one hand, EaP labour migrants in the EU found themselves in a profoundly difficult situation where they risked contracting the virus or losing their jobs, while on the other hand, the pandemic also substantially reduced people's mobility and increased unemployment. More importantly, it resulted in a considerable increase in the number of migrants returning to the EaP countries from the EU. The labour migrants' return revealed that the EaP countries were largely unprepared to address the specific needs of these people, negatively affecting their quality of life in many cases. At the same time, the return of labour migrants to the EaP countries coincided with economic distress in the region, revealing the high vulnerability of the local SME sector towards the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The actual effect on small and medium enterprises was rather sector-specific, owing largely to the diversity of the SME sector and differing degrees of adaptability towards digitalisation. In any case, the COVID-19 crisis distorted supply and demand within multiple value chains, with problems for business operations being multiplied by the limited capacities of EaP countries to earmark emergency support funds for the SMEs. The evolution of the SME sector during the pandemic demonstrated that, in many respects, there is no way back to the pre-COVID situation.

The COVID-19 pandemic also affected the services provided to the population by central and local governments. Being a sanitary crisis in nature, the pandemic had a strong impact on the water and waste management sectors: although scientific evidence on the extent to which water supply and wastewater systems have been vectors of contagion remains limited, sanitary risks in general (not only those related to COVID) are higher when water supply and wastewater sewerage are substandard. The same is true of non-sanitary landfills and illegal dumpsites.

Overall, the crisis amplified a series of previously unknown systemic deficiencies related to the organisation of economic activities, the labour market, and service sectors. While it is already apparent that this had a particularly pronounced impact at the local level, the full picture of the post-COVID trends and developments in these domains is not yet fully clear.

The COVID-19 period has been associated with a marked increase in online activities in the EaP countries. Yet, the pandemic-related measures undertaken in the countries also revealed the urgency of addressing a further set of systemic problems with ICT infrastructure, and a lack of

consistent effort of the states to significantly improve the population's digital and media literacy. On the one hand, the cross-cutting impact of COVID-19 on the media landscape and freedom of speech in the EaP countries had informative, mobilising, and equalising effects, demonstrating both the importance and vulnerability of the independent media outlets. It also underscored the role of free speech and independent media as impartial reporters and conflict mediators. However, the pandemic also highlighted people's over-exposure to fake news and propaganda, particularly among the older generation, rural residents, and people with lower levels of education. This situation has contributed to the circulation of conflicting narratives in the EaP societies, and, to a certain extent, to the polarisation of public discourse. At the same time, the pandemic revealed the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) and independent media in countering disinformation campaigns and oppressive government policies, showcasing their capacities for resilience and proving their importance as drivers of societal change.

The inherent problems with ICT infrastructure and digital literacy also affected the sphere of education in the EaP. The sanitary restrictions imposed in the region (except for Belarus) resulted in the swift transition of the education process towards distance learning. This situation revealed technical and human imbalances in the education systems of the EaP countries, where the practical implementation of new educational methods depended significantly on the available equipment, and on the skills and adaptability of individual teachers. That said, not all possible future effects of the pandemic on education are currently measurable.

The challenges outlined above make the COVID-19 crisis a perfect opportunity to reconsider existing governance models and modes of collaboration between different domestic and international stakeholders. Although significant qualitative change could hardly be expected in the short-term, the crisis has indeed opened up the possibility to address citizens' needs more effectively. More specifically, going forward, the authorities could learn from the experiences of the crisis and maintain continuous cooperation with local businesses and CSOs, assist them in developing relevant skills and competencies, and encourage their proactive approach to addressing people's needs.

The COVID-19 crisis also presents an opportunity to introduce innovations, and to increase the digitalisation of public services and business. The authorities could benefit from the creation of business-friendly e-platforms, and ensure an SME-friendly legal framework, bolstered by effective institutional arrangements for its implementation. In parallel, this trend will require substantial improvements to digital literacy in SMEs, and the expansion of transnational collaboration between authorities, businesses, academia, and CSOs concerning technology-, knowledge-, and best-practice transfers. Awareness-raising campaigns organised by CSOs in cooperation with other relevant stakeholders would appear to be particularly beneficial for the promotion of digitalisation among the population.

It is equally important to encourage local stakeholders to focus their efforts on working with returning migrants, and on perceiving the knowledge and skills they bring as assets for the post-COVID economic recovery and further societal changes. Moreover, the authorities should use the lessons of the pandemic to organise effective migration monitoring and analysis, to ensure better protection of their citizens while working abroad: for example, targeted and sector-specific

cooperation with governments and businesses in the EU could also facilitate labour migration and prevent human trafficking. The crisis should also provide the impetus needed to address the needs of disadvantaged, vulnerable, and underrepresented groups of the population more attentively.

Addressing citizens' needs also means improving the quality of public services. Therefore, in the spirit of 'building back better' – and with the ongoing 'green transition' firmly in mind – the crisis should incite governments to re-prioritise the improvement of water and wastewater infrastructure, and to accelerate the construction of sanitary landfills and recycling facilities, banning illegal landfills and starting their rehabilitation. Naturally, particular attention should be paid to some specific waste streams such as medical waste, used masks, and single-use plastics. With the pandemic also highlighting the unsustainability of global supply chain models, exploring shorter, more local alternatives, shorter material feedback loops, and other circular business models should be actively pursued.

The COVID-19 pandemic suggests that synergies between authorities, CSOs, businesses, and international stakeholders could play a positive role in improving ICT infrastructure, the quality of online and offline education, and digital and media literacy in the EaP region. Although the general situation with media and freedom of speech in the EaP countries is directly linked to the overall quality of democracy in the respective countries, and therefore approaches should remain country-specific, COVID-19 can also be seen as an opportunity to harmonise EU support for freedom of speech and media in the region, particularly with regards to a more focused effort to counter disinformation, propaganda, and hate speech in the media. To this end, cooperation with the EU and its member states would be beneficial, in terms of sharing technology, knowledge, and best-practices around fact-checking and countering propaganda. Endeavours aimed at the increasing digital and media literacy among the population at large also provide an opportunity to address the needs and systemic problems of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, including minorities.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this framework paper is to **summarise, consolidate and present** thematic research done in the framework of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF)'s COVID-19 Policy Paper series. Lessons learned and policy recommendations for the future are an important part of the papers, which cover seven key sectors – each elaborated by individual research teams between October 2020 and March 2021. It resulted in seven research papers whose main aim is to inform the potential for change offered by the COVID-19 crisis. These thematic papers and the present framework paper are based on the assumption that while the COVID-19 crisis has challenged different sectors of national, regional and local administration, the crisis also represents an opportunity for policy makers in the EaP countries to significantly transform these sectors and associated governance systems.

The seven policy papers aim to:
- Analyse how the crisis affected certain policy areas, identifying threats and opportunities for the medium and long-term;

- Demonstrate policy-driven solutions and recommendations;
- Provide a comparative regional perspective and identify lessons learned from both the EaP region and the EU.

The present framework paper, written in the style of a policy brief, relies partly on the research carried out within the seven individual research papers, which is complemented by the insights of the authors, based on other sources. Methodologically, the seven thematic papers were based on a review of relevant literature, interviews with relevant country stakeholders, and surveys. They provide a relatively detailed regional- and country-level overview of the different themes which interested readers are encouraged to explore separately, since the current document provides only limited country-level insights, while focusing on recommendations for the future rather than assessments of past performance. This is due to its regional, overarching character, and its purpose as a digestible summary of the policy paper series. Consequently, it should be noted that the recommendations provided within this framework paper are of regional relevance and are not tailored to specific countries.

2. COVID-19 as an opportunity for change

Although they may appear unconnected at first glance, the seven topics analysed below are very much interconnected.

Figure 1 - Good governance: a key factor for resilience
Source: Authors' own elaboration

For instance, success in the process of decentralisation has an important impact on other policy areas. Indeed, where decentralisation of power has been implemented effectively, it can be said that local governments have greater capabilities in providing high-quality services in water supply and treatment, waste management and transport. Local authorities empowered by

decentralisation are also better placed to provide much-needed support to the local SME sector, in terms of finding the optimal local reaction to the crisis which strikes a balance between sanitary-driven constraints and the need of local businesses to continue to function. As a further example, the labour migration topic is also related to decentralisation, since the effective devolution of power and resources has an impact on the ability of local governments to better cater to the needs of migrant workers, in terms of reintegration into their communities of origin, and the local health and economic systems. In sum, the level of effective decentralisation correlates with the resilience of the regions and cities, and the capacity to better adapt and react in times of crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The importance of digital literacy increased during the crisis. It became evident that the success of distance learning depends to a large extent on the ability of national educational systems to adapt quickly and deploy digital learning tools successfully, while among the broader population, digital literacy turned out to be closely related to the ability of individuals to find their way in a media environment often prone to disinformation. Digital literacy is also a pre-condition for firms take advantage of the opportunities offered by digitalisation: water and waste companies can adopt improved mechanisms for monitoring water quality and managing waste, transport operators can benefit from improved efficiency in the provision of their services due to smart technologies, and SMEs can see marked improvements to supply the monitoring of supply chains, production, and logistics. Moreover, digital literacy is set to play an increasing role in the health sector, in terms of the improvement of contact-tracing applications, the development of vaccination passports, and even the effective management of healthcare resources.

The question of freedom of speech and media is overarching and related to all sectors studied in this series. On the one hand, it is linked to the issue of media responsibility towards society with regards to reporting quality, evidence-based information. On the other hand, freedom of speech and media is also connected to more responsive governance, in which the authorities are ready to integrate feedback and criticism into their operations.

Education is also of a transversal character. Better general levels of education leads to greater capacity for local governments to function in a decentralised context, while allowing citizens to find their way more easily in an increasingly fragmented media environment. It can also ultimately alter the nature and scale of labour migration, and increase the pressure exercised by local communities on local governments, with regard to the provision of better quality services including in waste and water management, transport and SME support.

Decentralisation and local government

A complex and multi-layered power transfer concept, decentralisation implies proximity to citizens and their needs. The six EaP countries' respective levels of effective decentralisation vary significantly due to their differing size, ethnic and regional structures, and political organisation. Amongst other things, these factors determine the approaches and visions of the

"The effectiveness of local response to COVID-19 crisis depends on the level of decentralisation, the quality of local governance and the collaboration amongst relevant societal actors."

EaP countries towards empowering their local stakeholders with the roles and responsibilities of the central authorities. Despite these differences, one of the key factors to assess the proximity of state power to the citizens is civil society's ability to participate effectively in the development of local communities and the country at large, and to be a partner of the authorities in the implementation of specific policies.

Decentralisation implies improved capacities of local authorities to provide relevant services to the local population, and to tackle their problems without major interference from the central government. The COVID-19 pandemic was a major stressor for communities, as it required local authorities to promptly and adaptively respond to the crisis *in situ*. A multitude of factors predetermined the effectiveness of their performance, yet the proximity of the relevant stakeholders to the needs of a specific community was particularly crucial for the effective resilience of that community during the pandemic, and this will likely remain an important factor in the post-pandemic recovery too. Although the longer-term effects of COVID-19 within this context are not yet fully visible, at this time it can already be concluded that the pandemic's impact on specific regions or communities will differ even within individual EaP countries.

While the COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges for all six EaP countries, its specific impact at the regional level varied and was predetermined to a large extent by the ability of the local authorities to provide swift and solutions-oriented responses to the pandemic, as well as to involve relevant local and regional stakeholders in decision-making and policy implementation in such areas as healthcare, social services, and education. Two factors can be identified as potential threats for the effective

"The EU and other international donors should maintain and develop capacity-building and leadership programmes for local authorities, civil society activists, and businesses in the EaP countries to increase the cohesion amongst the local stakeholders and increase civil society's impact on decision-making processes."

implementation of the decentralisation process. First, local budgets are usually dependent on centralised financial systems, which often puts administrative units in competition with each other for central government funding – a situation made all the more difficult by local authorities' limited ability to generate their own revenues. Second, the high level of centralisation in the EaP countries (notably in Azerbaijan and Belarus) implies a low capability of local authorities to make effective decisions. This is exacerbated by insufficient transparency in decision-making, and poor accountability. Of course, this does not preclude local authorities from effectively tackling problems in their communities. However, in such cases of limited capacities and low transparency, the effectiveness of governance is frequently predetermined by personal and contextual factors, making this framework vulnerable to external shocks like pandemics.

Significant qualitative changes in the sphere of decentralisation in the EaP countries are unlikely in the short-term post-pandemic period. Such change is impeded by the complexity of the decentralisation process itself, and exacerbated by the financial vulnerability of local authorities as well as the rigidity of existing institutional and legal frameworks. In this situation, a proactive approach by relevant local stakeholders representing civil society will be pivotal for effectively addressing communities' needs and for implementing specific policies.

Therefore, in the EaP region as a whole:

- Local and national authorities should develop effective cooperation frameworks with local businesses and CSOs, to encourage or strengthen their engagement in solutions-oriented endeavours to address the needs of local communities;

- Local and national authorities should assist local businesses and CSOs in developing their skills and competencies aimed at effective participation in the life of the local communities and representation of their needs;

- Local businesses and CSOs should take a proactive stance in addressing the needs of local communities which fall within the scope of their expertise and capabilities;

- Local businesses and CSOs should be included in effective and continuous dialogue with the authorities, based on the principles of equal partnership, mutual respect, and trust;

- Decision-making processes at the local level should consider the needs of vulnerable and under-represented groups (including, but not limited to, people with disabilities, national minorities, and socially disadvantaged groups), and ensure their representation;

- Local communities should cooperate with domestic and international partners within the available frameworks, to exchange knowledge and best practices related to decentralisation.

Freedom of speech and media

The challenges for the media landscape and freedom of speech caused by the COVID-19 in the EaP region were manifold, and varied according to the different contexts and approaches to ensuring such freedoms in each country. While tackling these challenges during the pandemic, the EaP countries employed heterogeneous tactics, with COVID-19 affecting the sustainability and working modes of independent media outlets substantially.

The findings of the paper suggest three types of empirically measurable effects of the pandemic on the media landscape and freedom of speech situation in the EaP countries.

"Free speech and media are drivers of societal transformation and key to timely, evidence-based reaction to the crisis and a well-informed and responsible population."

The informative effect revealed both independent media's importance and vulnerability. On the one hand, the media served as an overarching information provider for different segments of society. On the other hand, the pandemic also revealed the limited capacities and status of free media, as their activities were challenged by the authorities' actions, including deliberate suppression of free speech under the guise of countering disinformation.

The mobilising effect revealed the capacities of independent media and civil society organisations as drivers for societal transformation, and their role as important actors in domestic politics –

particularly in terms of countering censorship measures adopted under the pretext of an emergency.

The equalising effect proved how independent media could act in the capacity of mediators and impartial reporters taking into account different perspectives, providing comprehensive and overarching coverage of the events and, thus, building bridges across community divisions. The digitalisation factor and the cross-regional structure of media activities add value to their effectiveness.

"While providing support to the civic media in the EaP countries, priority should be given to the media platforms and initiatives that ensure content quality, fact-checking, social responsibility, and awareness-raising capacities amongst the population at large."

Analysis of media independence and plurality in the EaP countries reveals the dependency of these factors on the overall situation with the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine demonstrate various degrees of satisfactory performance in ensuring these freedoms, albeit with frequent individual violations. The cases of Azerbaijan and Belarus differ substantially from the other four countries due to the authoritarian character of their political regimes. Yet, the developments in Belarus after the fraudulent 2020 presidential election revealed how the democratic deficit could be countered by the COVID-19 factor: mass dissatisfaction with Lukashenka's regime was multiplied by the country's economic and social problems, which were largely aggravated by the authorities' inaction in mitigating the pandemic's effects, and the role of the country's civil society and online media was crucial in this process. Despite excessive repressions from the Belarusian authorities, developments in the country have proven the need for the EU and its international partners to support the country's CSOs and independent media, and enhance their capacities.

This vision should be extended to all six EaP countries, as the crucial role of the EU in ensuring support for civil society could be beneficial for effectively mitigating challenges caused by various domestic and international factors. These range from deficiencies in the countries' healthcare systems, competing interests of different domestic and international stakeholders, restrictive or ill-adapted institutional and legal frameworks, and international conflicts. In these circumstances, CSOs and independent media have proven their capacities to positively influence governmental endeavours in countering pandemic-related challenges, and to maintain a positive atmosphere for dialogue with the authorities.

In general, the media landscape and freedom of speech situation depends on the overall quality of democracy in the individual EaP countries. Their current configurations had been shaped in the pre-COVID time, yet the pandemic revealed systemic deficiencies in the EaP states, particularly where the authorities used the crisis as a pretext for the implementation of further restrictions in the domains of free speech and media. At the same time, the COVID-19 emergency also demonstrated the capacities of CSOs and the media not only as important domestic stakeholders, but as drivers for societal transformations. The vulnerable position of CSOs and media vis-à-vis the authorities implies the need for a new conceptualisation of strategies aimed to

ensure open and solution-oriented debates in the EaP societies, especially on issues relating to the post-pandemic recovery.

Therefore:
- Problems with freedom of speech and media in the EaP countries should be vocalised whenever possible, while specific activities aimed at supporting freedom of speech and independent media should be both feasible and country-tailored;
- The authorities in the EaP countries should ensure that their efforts in combating propaganda and disinformation do not hinder (either intentionally or unintentionally) fundamental freedoms, including freedom of speech;
- The authorities in the EaP countries should introduce effective legislative measures to tackle the growing oligarchisation of the media, provided that such measures are not used to neutralise political rivals. The EU and other international donors should use progress in this domain as one of the criteria in deciding the level of the economic support it allocates to individual EaP countries;
- The EU should further support independent media outlets and media monitoring initiatives in the EaP countries. Grant schemes should be country-specific (taking into account possible problems with official registration, and engaging a broad number of media entities) and should focus particularly on fact-checking and combating hate-speech, as well as promoting media literacy among wider society;
- The authorities in the EaP countries should tackle manifestations of hate speech in the media more effectively and, whenever possible, cooperate with CSOs to achieve this end;
- Special focus should be made on supporting the media of national minorities, and those providing information in languages other than the official languages of the EaP countries. This could serve as an effective tool in countering foreign propaganda, particularly from Russia.

Digital literacy

The COVID-19 pandemic increased online activities and revealed the pressing need for the advancement of digital literacy among the population. While specific online services have been gradually and successfully introduced in all six EaP countries, their practical implementation was segmented and usually service-oriented. These shortcomings can partly be explained by underdeveloped ICT infrastructure, difficult adaptability to new technologies, or lack of access to such technologies among some segments of the population. In any case, the EaP countries lacked consistent efforts on the part of the authorities to foster qualitative improvements in the population's digital literacy.

"Improved digital literacy is key for the increased societal resilience in times of crisis as long as education, media healthcare, transport and utility services are concerned."

Digital literacy in the EaP countries is constrained by pre-existing factors such as the quality of democracy, polarised media landscapes, and people's exposure to fake news and a pro-Kremlin propaganda campaigns. The quality of democracy substantially defines the media landscape, while the polarisation of that landscape implicitly contributes to the introduction of conflicting narratives in the society. When it comes to fake news and propaganda campaigns, there is convincing evidence to suggest that older people, people with low levels of education, and rural residents are more exposed to this threat.

Figure 2 - Improved digital literacy: an enabling factor for improvements in multiple areas
Source: Authors' own elaboration

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these problems and contributed to the development of tools to counter the negative consequences of increasing online activities, in a context of insufficient digital literacy among the population. This situation revealed the positive role of CSOs and other civic initiatives, particularly in the creation of fact-checking platforms in all six EaP countries aimed at countering fake-news and propaganda.

Reshaping policies aimed at improving digital literacy in the region in the post-COVID context should take into account several aspects. From a technical point of view, enhancing digital literacy depends on the capacities of the ICT infrastructure in the EaP countries. Thus, the role of the CSOs, businesses, and international donors in providing relevant equipment, services, and knowledge will be crucial in the EaP countries, where the authorities often have limited funds to allocate for these purposes.

Taking into account domestic and international factors applicable to the EaP region, the success of endeavours to improve digital literacy is dependent on people's ability to analyse incoming information and check facts. While the EaP countries already have a number of fact-checking success stories, they can also benefit from the EU experience, and notably that of the Baltic states (for instance, the 'Lie Detector' project by the Lithuanian portal, Delfi). Focused efforts in this

domain would enable the effective countering of deliberate misinformation and of rumours overtly aimed at vulnerable segments of society.

The achievement of greater digital literacy is impossible without the creation of adequate digital governance in the EaP countries. This implies not only technical aspects but also training the population. In this regard, civil society organisations and initiatives could become effective partners of the states in achieving relevant knowledge and skills transfer. Because of the topic's transversal nature, recommendations already highlighted in the section on freedom of speech and media aimed at combating propaganda, disinformation, and manifestations of hate speech also apply to digital literacy in the EaP countries. These should be supplemented by the following suggestions for action:

- National and local authorities, CSOs and businesses as well as international partners and donors should be encouraged to cooperate more extensively to improve ICT infrastructure in the EaP countries;
- Improving digital literacy among different segments of the population should become a priority for the EaP countries, since digitalisation can lay the basis for greater resilience in the face possible future pandemics, and facilitate the fight against such phenomena. These endeavours should be supported by businesses, CSOs, and international partners and donors in providing necessary equipment (particularly to the members of socially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups) and facilitating knowledge transfer;
- Countering propaganda and fake news, particularly from Russia, is relevant to all societal groups in all six EaP countries, from schoolchildren to the elderly. Measures to combat disinformation should involve all relevant stakeholders, both domestic and foreign, while taking into account the specifics of the political configurations in individual EaP states. The EU and its member states should engage in the transfer of knowledge and best practices and, whenever possible, support fact-checking initiatives in the EaP countries with a specific focus on training various social groups;
- Whenever possible, training materials aimed at digital literacy should also be made available in the languages of national minorities.

Access to online and offline education

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the education systems of the EaP countries significantly. The introduction of emergency restrictions in the region (except for Belarus) to slow the spread of COVID-19 resulted in the rapid transition of the education process from the traditional face-to-face format to distance learning.

The pandemic left little to no time to prepare educational facilities and resources for the new realities. At the same time, this shift in teaching and learning methods was necessitated by an unforeseen emergency. In this sense, the EaP countries hardly differ from other regions of the world, where the same shift was taking place, under the same exceptional circumstances. Yet, the emergency also revealed previously-existing imbalances in the education system, which can be attributed to both technical and human factors. The former concerns a lack of proper infrastructure to enable the transition towards distance learning, and to reach all segments of

society, including the most vulnerable groups, while the latter relates the difficulties in the adaptability of teachers and students to the new formats. It became clear that the direct transposition of traditional face-to-face teaching methods and techniques to distance learning is not always effective, while the technical opportunities offered by existing online education platforms require new approaches to teaching in order to meet students' needs. Thus, the practical implementation of distance learning on the ground differs greatly from one country to another – and even within countries – depending on the available infrastructure, resources, and the individual capacities of the teaching personnel.

At the same time, not all effects of the shift in the education sphere are currently observable; some of the pandemic's more durable impact could potentially only be measurable several years from now. For instance, with regards to the impact of distance learning on educational attainment and the quality of teaching, although the available data indicate a decrease in students' performance and frequent problems related to coping with the curriculum, the reversibility of these patterns and their actual impact on the students' educational and career prospects in the medium and long term are still to be manifested.

New approaches to education in the EaP countries in the wake of COVID-19 should place a real emphasis on the central role of education for societal development and economic conditions. The available evidence shows that economic difficulties caused by the COVID-19 could further increase the unemployment rate and create additional obstacles for the graduates' employability; in this challenging context, the younger generation's employment prospects will depend heavily on a high-quality education, which imparts the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in the modern world.

At the same time, it is evident that the successful performance of students heavily depends on the possession of the necessary ICT equipment, access to the internet, and the ability to use the available online learning platforms. As specified in the section on digital literacy, engagement of CSOs and businesses in this process is pivotal for its success. Examples from Armenia, with special internet packages for students, or Moldova, with the provision of ICT equipment for students and teachers by international donors, confirm the added value of these synergies.

Although the rapid shift towards distant learning was compelled by emergency circumstances, it is unlikely that the education system in the EaP countries will ever return entirely to its pre-COVID conditions. This gives national, regional, and local authorities food for thought in terms of new formats for cooperation with the CSOs, businesses, and international donors to ensure that the quality of education is aligned with the challenges of the post-COVID times.

"The COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to introduce innovative approaches and techniques in the education domain."

In addition to the recommendations relating to education and knowledge transfer specified in the section on digital literacy, the following additional actions are proposed:
- Central and local governments in the EaP should coordinate their efforts aimed at increasing access to ICT equipment among different actors in the education process. A

particular emphasis should be made on ensuring the access of socially-disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, including minorities;

- The authorities should cooperate with CSOs and businesses as well as international partners and donors to increase the supply of ICT equipment, and ensure the multilingual transfer of relevant knowledge and skills;
- The EU should provide continuous and extended financial support to the EaP countries to build the necessary capacities in the sphere of education, with the special attention paid to rural areas, and vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

Labour migration

The EaP region is heavily affected by labour out-migration. In the EaP countries, one in six persons of employable age works abroad. Although the figures vary from one country to another, an overall increase in this tendency has been observed. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a marked deterioration in the living and working situation of EaP migrants in the EU, many of whom found themselves trapped between the risk of contracting the virus, and the risk of losing their income. Anti-COVID measures also reduced people's mobility, and frequently resulted in a curtailing of business activities and growing unemployment. This situation partially changed previous migration patterns and flows, as some people were prevented from emigrating while others had to return to their home countries. However, it is not currently clear at this stage whether labour migration flows from the EaP to the EU will return to their pre-COVID levels.

The available statistics suggest that around one in three EaP labour migrants returned home at some point in 2020. In most cases, this move was determined by the effects of the anti-COVID measures on the economy. It should be noted that this impact was not just felt by the migrants themselves – indeed, workers from the EaP region are important for the economies of the EU member states, although it varies from one country to another. While migration dynamics can be assessed numerically, the full picture of their situation differs from one migrant category to another.

Finally, COVID-19 revealed systemic problems in the EaP economies themselves: with home countries unprepared for the large-scale return of labour migrants, many returnees saw limited job-seeking perspectives, thus affecting their quality of life.

"Labour migrants remain precious assets for EaP countries and their knowledge and competences could benefit their countries of origin enormously in the presence of smart integration policies."

While the EaP countries introduced measures to support their economies during the COVID-19 pandemic, returning labour migrants were far from prioritised by these endeavours. The EaP governments all lacked clearly-formulated priority-level strategies aimed at the economic reintegration of returning migrants, and changing their attitudes towards permanently re-establishing themselves in the home country. As a result, the majority of the returnees are likely to seek opportunities abroad as soon as it becomes possible again.

National and local authorities in the EaP countries must address the specific needs of the returnees. Yet, the current situation caused by the COVID-19 seems temporary, largely because it is not clear whether the intensity of the post-COVID migration outflows from the EaP will follow pre-pandemic patterns. Notwithstanding this uncertainty, the following concrete actions should nonetheless be taken:

- Central and local authorities should design, institutionalise and implement feasible programmes aimed at the economic reintegration of migrants (including trainings, assistance with job searches and placements, low interest loans to start their own businesses, etc.) and use of their knowledge and qualifications in the EaP economies;
- Governments should view the skills and knowledge brought by returning migrants as an opportunity for economic recovery and positive societal changes, and pursue active measures to encourage returnees to remain in the home country longer-term;
- Governments should develop and maintain comprehensive tools for migration monitoring and analysis, enabling a more targeted approach to supporting current and potential future migrants, including efforts to protect their rights abroad and prevent human trafficking;
- At the bi- and multilateral levels, the EaP authorities should facilitate dialogue with authorities and businesses in the EU member states, in order to facilitate the implementation of a more coherent and coordinated migration policy, to enhance mutually-beneficial legal labour migration, and protect migrants' rights;
- In order to implement the above, EaP governments, businesses, and CSOs, as well as international partners and donors should strengthen their overall collaboration in the migration field.

SMEs' digital transformation

The COVID-19 crisis has had a profound impact on the SME sector in the EaP countries. Irrespective of the economic sector and with very few exceptions, small and medium sized businesses were more severely affected by the pandemic's consequences than larger companies. At the same time, different SME sectors had distinct starting conditions to cope with the new challenges caused by COVID-19.

As a result of the pandemic, both the supply and the demand in the SME sector were distorted. The former relates to the interruption of existing supply chains and reductions in labour force capabilities due to COVID-related restrictions. The latter includes the sharp

"The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that the use of technology is a solution for SME sustainability.

The effectiveness of SMEs' digital transformation is contingent on overarching awareness-raising and digital literacy campaigns involving local and national authorities, businesses, CSOs, academia, and international partners and donors."

decrease in financial returns caused by slumping demand, and the erosion of clients' purchasing power. The effects of this were exacerbated by the limited financial capacities of the EaP governments to maintain emergency funds for SMEs particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the hardships caused by the economic downturn, COVID-19 provided an opportunity for companies to innovate, particularly by embracing and expanding the use of digital technologies. Currently, it is difficult to assess the full impact of the pandemic on the SME sector. It is likely, however, that the sector will not return to its pre-COVID conditions.

New post-COVID approaches to the digital transformation of SMEs in the EaP region should address economic conditions within individual EaP states, and a wide range of SMEs across multiple sectors, taking into account the specific needs and conditions of different sectors, and their differing capacities to absorb the innovations brought by digitalisation.

Available evidence from during the pandemic suggest that the SME sector will never return to its pre-COVID conditions, and that its further digitalisation is unavoidable. This process was already underway, but was catalysed by the circumstances of the pandemic. Despite their diversity, common set of challenges faced by SMEs in the EaP countries is discernible, including insufficient digital literacy among SME representatives, which is multiplied by a lack of capacities to contract professionals capable to maintain and support the proper functioning of these tools in the activities of a specific business. Moreover, small businesses located in larger urban centres have proven to be more effective in adapting to the new realities triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As for authorities, substantial progress has been observed in the implementation of the e-government platforms in all EaP countries that could be beneficial to SMEs. Yet substantial discrepancies can be observed between the potential offered by digitalisation, and its practical implementation. This gap is typically caused by an insufficiently developed infrastructure, a lack of relevant knowledge and skills within SMEs, and limited abilities to build the necessary capacities in the short run.

Further digitalisation of the SME sector is a matter of time. The general understanding of the inevitability of this process provides the authorities at different levels as well as SMEs themselves with the opportunity to reassess the current lessons of the digital transformation in order to develop feasible strategies aimed at tackling the problems triggered and highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- EaP governments should strengthen the necessary capacities for 'going digital' by developing and extending relevant online platforms, ensuring a friendly and comprehensive legal framework, and creating effective institutional mechanisms for its implementation;
- The authorities, businesses, and academia should establish and deepen their collaboration in the field of research and innovation, creating added value for the EaP regional market and extending cross-border cooperation;
- The authorities should stimulate improvements in digital literacy among small and medium sized businesses, including through transnational collaboration between governments, businesses, academia, and CSOs. Such collaboration should focus particularly on the transfer of technologies, knowledge, and best practices;
- Within the context of SMEs' digitalisation, the authorities should promote mutual respect and trust in their relations with businesses, while businesses providing digital services and

solutions should demonstrate responsible commitments towards their clients and contractors;

- CSOs should contribute proactively to digitalisation by providing relevant expertise for the authorities and businesses, and by organising awareness-raising campaigns aimed at the promotion of SME digitalisation among the population at large.

Waste and water management

The COVID-19 pandemic is a sanitary and hygiene crisis, with strong links to regional and urban water supply and sanitation and waste management systems. The consequences for the health and well-being of the population of the pandemic's impact on this sector are not as tangible and immediately visible as in other sectors (e.g. transport, media, education, etc.), but risk to materialise at a later stage.

Local authorities and utility companies have had to adapt to the new context, and will carry on doing so in the future. For example, sanitary constraints lead to disruptions in waste collection and the suspension of the operation of recycling facilities, leading to a much higher rate of incineration and landfilling, while the sanitary crisis has also caused a much higher generation of specific waste streams such as medical waste (including used masks) and single-use plastics. Moreover, the COVID-19 virus can also be detected in some water supply and sewerage systems – a fact which will require water utility companies to improve their water quality monitoring systems. While data on these occurrences are still lacking, it is clear that untreated wastewater is and will continue to be associated with an increased risk of contagion.

"The COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity for national, regional and city-level policymakers in EaP countries to question current unsustainable practices in water and waste management and accelerate improvement both in terms of institutions and infrastructure."

The impact of the pandemic has not been exclusively negative, however. For instance, while municipal solid waste increased significantly, reduced economic activity led to smaller volumes of generated industrial waste and wastewater, and improved water quality in rivers, waterways and coastal zones. This positive consequence once again drew the public's attention to the often negative environmental effects of human economic activity and leisure in pre-pandemic times. The crisis also highlighted the high inherent risks associated with long supply and value chains, particularly in the food and industrial sectors. This has the potential to spur policy makers into imagining a future where shorter supply loops are favoured, in close connection to the notions of localism, the circular economy, and even reindustrialisation.

In terms of waste and the circular economy, the EaP countries are still mostly in the stage of 'take-make-use-dispose-pollute', with most waste being landfilled in non-sanitary landfills. This inevitably carries associated health risks in general, which were exacerbated during the pandemic. Very few circular feedback loops – if any – exist within the EaP economies.

All EaP countries struggle with illegal waste dumping, and very little progress has been made with separate waste collection and recycling except for Belarus. Despite existing legislation in most EaP countries (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) a fundamental change in waste management has not yet occurred, due to a number of reasons, including a low level of decentralisation leading to limited municipal capacity for implementation and enforcement of environmental and waste management provisions. Where positive examples are observed, these are oftentimes individual projects, implemented on a small scale and funded by foreign donors, rather than signs of a wholesale restructuring of the entire system. Wastewater treatment plants exist, but they do not always function in line with European standards, and they tend to offer only primary and sometimes secondary treatment. This situation increases the risks of COVID-19 contaminating water supplies.

Figure 3 - Good governance in waste and water management
Source: Authors' own elaboration

The post-COVID era presents an opportunity for the EaP countries to go beyond the legal transposition of EU legislation – their primary focus so far, at least for the three countries having signed Association Agreements with the EU (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) and for Armenia, which has signed Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

Improvements can be made in several areas and should be conducted through a combination of national, regional and local policy measures and interventions. To this end, relevant stakeholders should:

● Take stock of missing water and waste infrastructure and keep investing into water and waste management infrastructure in line with EU norms. Better infrastructure (water supply, wastewater treatment, sanitary landfills and recycling facilities) would lead to an automatic increase in sanitary standards in urban and rural areas during and after similar pandemic crises. Funding should come from national budgets and international donors;

- Upgrade existing water and waste infrastructure where this is technically possible. Shifting from primary to secondary and tertiary wastewater treatment would serve as an additional safeguard against future sanitary crises.
- Enforce existing illegal dumpsite bans and launch programmes and roadmaps for the rehabilitation of illegal dumpsites, which risk to become vectors of contagion;
- Reform and strengthen water and waste utility companies with regards to their technical and management capacities, independence, and commercialisation, so that they can withstand similar crises in the future in the most efficient and professional way;
- Improve the management of medical waste in line with EU technical requirements by streamlining its collection and incineration in special incinerators.
- Explore first steps for transitioning towards a more circular economy by introducing separate collection and recycling of different waste streams. At the same time, EaP countries should explore circular business models which embrace higher levels on the waste hierarchy such as repairing, reusing, remanufacturing, sharing, etc., without prejudice to good 'regular' waste management. The EU has an important role to play in this respect by funding new circular initiatives, transferring successful practices from EU countries to the EaP region, and integrating EaP stakeholders into relevant EU peer learning initiatives;
- Strengthen the capacities of national and local governments, as well as the relevant local ecosystems, to implement the transition to the circular and digital economy. Digital solutions have a tangible value added in water and waste management by improving water monitoring and optimising material and waste flows;
  Policy makers should use the crisis to reinitiate discussions on new possible models of production, distribution, purchasing, and consumption of goods and raw materials (e.g. the sharing economy, local consumption, etc.). In future, this would lead to shorter circuits and loops, stimulate local ecosystems, and mitigate the negative impacts of possible disruptions of global value chains.

3. The way to greater resilience

The COVID-19 crisis served as **a litmus test for the functioning and the robustness of different democratic institutions** in EaP countries (e.g. media and freedom of speech) as well as key **societal and economic sectors** (education, transport, waste, water, etc.). Although the efficiency and effectiveness of national responses to the pandemic are yet to be studied in great detail, a number of lessons can be drawn for the future. These lessons can **energise sometimes stalling reforms and serve as a blueprint for future reforms in the EaP region**.

Resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic caught most countries and regions, including the EaP region, unprepared. This was due to a complex set of reasons, ranging from the objective novelty and severity of the crisis to the incapacity of local governments to provide tailored answers and support, and the weakening of reactions due to conflicting media discourses – among other factors. As a result, the healthcare system was quickly overwhelmed, while the education system

and the SME sector could not adapt fast enough to the new situation, all while in most cases not receiving much-needed support. The crisis also revealed the inherent vulnerability of certain societal actors (e.g. SMEs, hospitals) and groups of the population (e.g. labour migrants). It should be noted that **most deficiencies that manifested during the crisis were known beforehand, but their effects only became more tangible in the context of the pandemic.**

The overall conclusion is that societies were insufficiently resilient to a crisis of this size. Since it has become increasingly clear over the past year that many changes within societies will be irrevocable, **EaP countries should seize the moment and introduce or accelerate reforms which will increase societal adaptability and resilience.**

The centrality of good governance

Good governance is key for dealing with changing societies and future crises of such proportions. Good governance has multiple facets, but the successful transfer of competences from the central to the regional and local level is one of its most important dimensions. Therefore, the process of decentralisation in EaP countries needs to be accelerated. As a result, local governments will be better able to provide tailored services (transport, waste, water, education, healthcare, etc.) and immediate support to citizens and businesses. Fostering a local ecosystem of civil society organisations, business intermediaries and academia is another important aspect of good governance, as **societal resilience is higher in a context where multiple actors participate in and shape local development.** Good governance is also crucial to the functioning of service and utility companies in areas such as transport, and water and waste management. The more these companies are competent and autonomous, the more their responses are agile and timely. This will be needed even more in the future, in the context of the development of modern, adapted local water, waste and transport systems, and the transition to the circular economy.

Cities

Cities have seen the largest number of COVID cases and some of the deepest economic impacts, and, consequently, have received the bulk of anti-crisis support. **Therefore, the resilience of cities should become a central concept for EaP countries in the future.** As mentioned previously, city resilience is dependent on the availability of finance for local authorities and their mandate to act, but also on their capacity to harness relevant societal and economic actors in a collaborative way. As, without any doubt, cities will be changing in multiple directions in the post-COVID context, **EaP countries should grasp the opportunity to rethink their cities**. Changes will be multiple and will include the organisation of transport, a higher degree of pedestrianisation, more green areas, and more. New concepts relating to circular cities and citizens' well-being should be explored, implying shorter supply chains, better waste management, and closer proximity of services. Cities are also the place where a large part of the digital transformation is taking place; they therefore need to develop visions and roadmaps for becoming 'smarter'.

The future of work and education: the digital enabler

Although the process of digitalisation was already gaining speed prior to COVID-19, the pandemic demonstrated its centrality for a number of sectors. The nature of work has changed profoundly during the past year and most white collar workers have switched to partial or complete remote working. Naturally, organisations and SMEs need to adapt their systems and rethink their relations to work and employees in order not to be left behind. The change in working patterns has had a significant impact on other sectors such as transport, while the impact of remote work on cities might also be observed, should there be an outflow of people moving away from city centres to cheaper, greener areas. Education is also deeply influenced by digitalisation and will be shaped by it in the future. Though schools and universities will continue to be the physical space for teaching and learning, the diversity and variety of online education will continue to grow. Moreover, the competitiveness of SMEs is also directly dependent on digital capabilities: SMEs need to align themselves with the trends of remote working, but also capture the opportunities provided by the Internet of Things (IoT) and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Naturally, the better the EaP countries are at increasing the digital literacy of citizens and industry, the more they can benefit from new developments.

Freedom of speech and media as guarantors of democratic societies

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated problems with access to information in the EaP region. Although the crisis was accompanied by increasing online activities and consumption of media products by the population, the anti-COVID measures introduced by many EaP governments revealed the vulnerability of existing regulatory frameworks and media landscapes. At the same time, the changes triggered by COVID-19 also offer scope for rethinking the freedom of speech domain in the EaP region: for instance, since digital and media literacy are crucial for societal resilience against the threats of propaganda, fake news, and hate speech, governments should be further encouraged in their efforts to develop the independent media sector and the harness the power of digitalisation and new educational approaches. In parallel, **more effective domestic and international mechanisms should be developed to prevent the authorities from curtailing freedom of speech and using selective politically-motivated sanctions against opponents**. While independent media proved to be one of the key drivers for societal transformation during the crisis, **the pandemic also revealed the increasing demand for quality and ethical journalism.** On the one hand, this trend should encourage greater international support for building the capacities of the media in the EaP countries. On the other hand, it should serve as one of the main criteria for EU macro-financial support in the EaP region, particularly in such countries as Azerbaijan and Belarus, where media independence and freedom of speech are severely restricted.

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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.

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