

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum - Working Group 1

Online Meeting, 20 – 21 June 2024

Short report for distribution

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) Working Group 1 (WG1) held its first meeting online on 20-21 June 2024. The event, spanning five sessions, involved the introduction of delegates, statutory elections, policy country updates, and the formulation of the 2024-2025 Work Plan.

Statutory elections and results

Following an introductory first session, the EaP CSF Secretariat staff members launched the election of both the EaP and EU WG Coordinators. The candidates included Lasha Tugushi (European Initiative Liberal Academy Tbilisi, Georgia), Ziya Guliyev (Law Society of Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan), Anh Helge (ForumCiv – EaP Network, Sweden), Sergiu Panainte (Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, a Project of the German Marshall Fund of the US, Romania), and Pavel Havlicek (Association for International Affairs, Czechia). The candidates presented their motivations and electoral programmes and engaged in a Q&A session with delegates.

The vote resulted in the election of Lasha Tugushi and Anh Helge as the new coordinators: <https://vote.electionrunner.com/election/UM42W/results>

Policy country updates

Delegates provided updates from their respective EaP countries and National Platforms.

Armenia. Lousineh Hakobyan, WG1 delegate and appointed spokesperson in the session on behalf of local WG1 coordinator within the Armenian National Platform, outlined the achievements to civil society reform in Armenia in police reform and promoting EU integration. However, she stressed the persistence of challenges with respect to protection of human rights, rule of law and good governance. Furthermore, she identified challenges in the security domain emerging from Russia, notably hybrid threats, and Azerbaijan, particularly the forced deportation of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijan. Ziya Guliyev, local WG1 coordinator within the Azerbaijani National Platform, presented the main challenges regarding human rights and rule of law, including a shrinking civil society space, restrictions on free speech and assembly, and non-alignment with the rulings of the ICHR. He highlighted that civil society is faced with a restrictive legislative and operational environment, limited infrastructural capability and the lack of genuine partnership between civil society and government. Lastly, he stressed the need to create multi-stakeholder formats for cooperation and consultation and increasing presence in EaP network and events.



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Belarus. Kanstantsin Staradubets, local WG1 coordinator within the Belarusian National Platform, outlined the increasing levels of repression and human rights violations including, laws limiting the democratic freedoms and regulating the activity of NGOs and political parties. Violations of political and civil rights are systemic nation-wide and vast masses of the population are targeted in politically motivated trials, accompanied by systemic violence and resulting in long prison sentences often amounting to torture. He called for increasing resilience and capacity of civil society operating both within the country and in exile.

Georgia. Kornely Kakachia, WG1 delegate and appointed spokesperson in the session on behalf of local WG1 coordinator within the Georgian National Platform, explained that that democratic backsliding in Georgia is worsening as the country is moving from an emerging authoritarianism to consolidated authoritarianism. In light of the foreign influence law, he expressed concern over the legitimacy of the upcoming election at the end of October in Georgia. He further highlighted the challenge posed by Russian influence and information manipulation in Georgia.

Moldova. Diana Doroş, WG1 delegate and appointed spokesperson in the session on behalf of local WG1 coordinator within the Moldovan National Platform, explained that civil society has played a key role in contributing to Commission consultation as well as providing expertise and supporting implementation of reform necessitated by European integration. The government has approved several policy documents in which civil society participated including on the promotion of equality between women and men, prevention of violence against women, and combating corruption. Strengthening the capacity of civil society representatives and promoting European integration should be treated as priority.

Ukraine. Olga Pyshchulina, WG1 delegate and appointed spokesperson in the session on behalf of local WG1 coordinator within the Ukrainian National Platform, presented the main achievements of Ukraine on the path of democratic reforms through European integration. However, democratisation processes are primarily influenced by the war which has led to a redirection of internal resources to resisting the aggressor, complicated the pace of pro-European reforms, and imposed temporary legislative restriction of some rights and freedoms. She called for further support to public authorities in establishing the decision-making process based on transparent and inclusive public consultation practices with civil society.

WG1 Work Plan 2024-2025

The final session was dedicated to discussing WG priorities and developing the 2024-2025 Work Plan through two breakout discussions, one covering the implementation of democratic governance and the rule of law and the other covering the strengthening security resilience. In the first room, key issues included strengthening institutional frameworks, enhancing the role of civil society, and promoting the rights of minorities. In the second room, key issues included addressing hybrid threats, including FIMI, energy security, and territorial conflict.

Conclusions

The meeting concluded with the members of the working group agreeing to coordinate and articulate key policy priorities across the region, preparing for the WG Work Plan, policy paper, and prepare for the next in-person meeting in Vienna (EaP CSF Civil Society Summit).