

EaP CSF Working Group 1 Meeting 2024 **‘Democracy, human rights, good governance and stability’**

Venue: NH Danube City Hotel

Tuesday, 19 November 2024

On November 19, 2024, EaP CSF Working Group 1 (WG1) delegates held their second meeting of the year. The meeting was moderated by the WG1 Coordinators, **Lasha Tughushi**, Working Group 1 EaP Coordinator, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, **Anh Helge**, Working Group 1 EU Coordinator, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

Key Objectives

- Report to delegates on EaP CSF activities since the last Working Group 1 meeting, 20 and 21 June 2024;
- Ensure delegates are up to date about the ongoing process of the elaboration of the WG1 Policy Paper;
- Facilitate the exchange of views and recommendations in view of the vote of the EaP CSF Civil Society Summit resolution.

REPORTING AND FEEDBACK

WG1 coordinators, Lasha Tughushi and Anh Helge, introduced delegates the WG1 activities stemming from the WG1 2024-2025 Work Plan.

Based on the contributions provided by the WG1 delegates at the WG1 meetings on 20 and 21 June 2024, the EaP CSF Secretariat elaborated the policy paper ‘The Eastern Partnership policy, its multilateral track, and the role of civil society therein’, approved by the EaP CSF Steering Committee in September 2024. The policy paper served as an advocacy tool in view of the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union (January-June 2025). On the basis of the policy paper, the EaP CSF will elaborate a Memorandum, a brief written position paper identifying EaP CSF main messages and priorities on the EaP policy and the role of civil society therein.

WG1 coordinators announced delegates that the EaP Working Group for Gender Equality will be held online on 9 December 2024.

Among WG1 delegates, Shahla Ismayil and Liliana Palihovici attended on behalf of the EaP CSF.

WG1 POLICY PAPER

The WG1 coordinators provided updates and the timeline for the policy paper on *“Advancing democratisation in the Eastern Partnership countries: the role of civil society in national reforms, and European Integration”*.

The elaboration of the paper by Anastasia Pociumban is based on an inclusive process. A dedicated survey for the paper was open until 8 December 2024 and 12 interviews



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are scheduled. The paper is aimed to be finalised in February 2025 ahead of the 7th EaP Summit.

FINALISATION OF THE RESOLUTION

With the support of WG1 coordinators, WG1 delegates reviewed and revised sections of the draft resolution that solely relate to the thematic area of expertise of the Working Group. The WG1 coordinators gathered input and later shared it with the EaP CSF Secretariat focal point. Following its adoption, the resolution is now available [here](#).

COUNTRY UPDATES

- **Armenia** – presented by Edgar Khachatryan, National Facilitator, Armenian National Platform

Civil Society Initiatives: Seven civil society organisations (CSOs) are collaborating with three political parties to draft a law focused on Armenia’s perspective towards the EU. Additionally, CSOs are actively fighting disinformation and countering Russia’s attempt to shape public opinion thoughts. There is an ongoing effort to ratify the Istanbul Convention, protect minority rights, and pass anti-discrimination legislation. Civil society actively pushes for reforms, particularly in the judiciary, law enforcement and security sectors.

Reform implementation: Major reforms, such as the Vetting process in the judiciary, the anti-corruption campaign, and CEPA implementation are facing challenges. In these circumstances, the role of civil society is crucial in driving the reform processes and holding the government accountable.

Economy: Maintaining a strong relationship with the EU is highly beneficial for Armenia as the EU is a key geostrategic partner. More importantly, the Armenian population is supportive of this partnership. Public support for EU membership is strong, with 58% favouring integration (per IRA data). Economic diversification remains one of the main priorities of Armenia, with the EU playing an important role in this effort.

- **Azerbaijan** – presented by Shahla Ismayil, National Facilitator, Azerbaijani National Platform

Civil Society: The country is experiencing a second wave of crackdown on civil society. Since October 2023, more than 50 social activists have been arrested on different charges, with 5 out of 60 civil society representatives currently in prison. Regardless of some progress, the situation remains concerning. International stakeholders have provided limited support to Azerbaijani civil society, which struggles with scarce resources and increasing repression. Advocacy for European engagement and presence in the Caucasus remains a priority.

Elections: Both the presidential and parliamentary elections failed to meet democratic standards, with the government consolidating power further through pro-regime candidates.

COP29: Hosting COP29 highlighted Azerbaijan’s environmental agenda but also brought attention to its human rights record. Civil society used the platform to amplify calls for reforms despite their underrepresentation.

Relations with Armenia: The relations with Armenia are closer to peace than they have been in the past three decades. Although there are still many complications, these issues have been managed with the mediation of various allies. Both sides have shown a good level of commitment. COP29 presented an opportunity for a symbolic action as a pre-peace agreement stage but it did not succeed.

- **Belarus** – presented by Liubou Lanina, WG1 delegate, spokesperson in the session in representation of the Belarusian National Platform

Political Repression: The authoritarian regime continues its crackdown on civil society, with new charges brought against exiled activists and hundreds of political prisoners still detained. A small number of prisoners were pardoned, but the repression persists.

Civil Society in Exile: With most organisations operating from abroad, civil society focuses on educational exchanges, advocacy, and maintaining personal networks to influence the domestic audience. Independent media also operate in exile, countering Russian propaganda and government-controlled narratives.

Public Sentiment: While a small minority still supports Lukashenka, many oppose his alignment with Russia, particularly regarding the war in Ukraine. Surveys indicate widespread opposition to Russian troops and aggression within Belarusian society.

Security Concerns: Exiled activists face increasing risks, including charges in absentia and difficulties in renewing documents. Cybersecurity threats and Russian disinformation remain pervasive challenges.

- **Georgia** – presented by Lasha Tughushi, Co-Chair, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum; EaP Coordinator, Working Group 1

Post-Election crisis: Allegations of election fraud and suppression of opposition have led to mass protests, with young people and civil society playing leading roles. Opposition parties have refused to take their parliamentary seats, leaving the country on the brink of a political crisis. The EU and international partners are conducting ongoing investigations into the election process. Meanwhile, Russian propaganda, supported by the ruling party, remains influential.

Geopolitical orientation: While the ruling party publicly supports EU membership, its actions suggest alignment with Russian narratives, exacerbating domestic divisions and eroding public trust.

Democratic backsliding: Civil society and media face increasing restrictions. Recent protests have been met with police crackdowns, further shrinking democratic space. The situation in Tbilisi has aggravated, with street rallies led by a younger generation demanding democracy and democratic values. Many of the protestors have been arrested for no legitimate reason.

EU Monitoring and future elections: Calls for EU election monitoring and the potential for new elections reflect the urgent need to restore public confidence and ensure democratic accountability.

- **Moldova** – presented by Ion Manole, WG1 delegate, spokesperson in the session in representation of the Moldovan National Platform

Civil society: Civil society remains polarised, with a considerable part of the population supporting Russia. Despite this, civil society plays a crucial supportive role

in the path to European integration and in the reform process. Investigative journalism outpaces state institutions in addressing corruption and governance issues.

Ongoing challenges: Propaganda, fake news and disinformation target democratic and pro-European voices. Media freedom is severely restricted, under the control of Russian funding and influence. The process of judicial reforms and the fight against corruption is slow and the results are not promising, raising concerns about its influence on the next parliamentary campaign.

Moldova's candidacy for EU membership marks a significant achievement, but societal divisions remain stark.

Hybrid threats: Moldova remains vulnerable to Russian influence, particularly in Gagauzia and Transnistria. The lack of effective communication and engagement with these regions exacerbates the challenges.

Strategic communication needs: Efforts to counter Russian narratives and disinformation require better strategic messaging and grassroots engagement, particularly in vulnerable regions and rural areas.

- **Ukraine** – presented by Igor Stukalenko, WG1 delegate, spokesperson in the session in representation of the Ukrainian National Platform

Russia's war of aggression: Russia's full-scale invasion has reached 1,000 days, underscoring the importance of Ukraine's resistance for regional stability. Civil society emphasizes energy security, infrastructure reconstruction, and countering Russian aggression as top priorities.

Energy security: Ensuring stable energy supplies is critical for Ukraine's survival and long-term recovery. Infrastructure development and resilience are key areas of focus.

Civil society's role: Ukrainian civil society plays a pivotal role in advocating for reforms, mobilising international support, and maintaining public morale amid Russia's war of aggression. Collaborative efforts with EU stakeholders are crucial for reconstruction and reform alignment.

Post-war integration: Civil society emphasises the need to integrate Ukraine's reconstruction into Eastern Partnership initiatives, ensuring alignment with broader European goals.

Strategic objectives:

- Civil society should continue to hold national authorities accountable and strengthen public participation.
- Civil society supports the EU in enhancing the multilateral cooperation potential of the EaP.
- The forum is a visible and well-regarded actor in EaP countries and EU member states.
- The EaP CSF is a platform with a stronger voice in the EU, EaP countries and EU Member States.