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**EASTERN PARTNERSHIP  
CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM**

# **The future of the Eastern Partnership policy, its multilateral track, and the role of civil society**

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The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) is the largest umbrella organisation representing civil society from the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region and the European Union (EU) vis-à-vis the EaP. The EaP CSF works together with over 1,200 organisations to promote European integration, facilitate reforms and democratic transformation in the Eastern Partnership countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine. Our mission is to ensure effective participation of EaP and EU civil society in the process of planning, monitoring and implementation of the Eastern Partnership policy in constant dialogue with EaP and EU decision-makers. The EaP CSF works to strengthen civil society's voice in the EaP multilateral track, and at national level through its National Platforms to facilitate the achievement of the goals of the EaP policies in each of the EaP countries. The EaP CSF advocates for an enabling environment for civil society. It promotes capacity building to improve its abilities to contribute to policy dialogue and provides financial support for regional projects to advance reform in the EaP countries.

## Background

Since its launch in 2009, the Eastern Partnership policy has been successful in increasing the resilience of the EaP region. The EU's cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries is based upon the current multilateral architecture provided by the Joint Staff Working Document (JSWD) "Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities" The JSWD, endorsed at the last-held Eastern Partnership Summit in December 2021, identifies strengthening resilience as the overarching policy framework of the EaP and includes five thematic priorities on (i) resilient, sustainable and integrated economies; (ii) accountable institutions, the rule of law and security; (iii) environmental and climate resilience; (iv) resilient digital transformation; and (v) resilient, fair and inclusive societies.

The EaP policy provides a framework for cooperation both multilaterally between the EU and the EaP region and bilaterally between the EU and each of the EaP countries. Civil society has been a constant of the EaP policy and regardless of each countries' level of engagement with the EU, democratic civil society has always been a stable interlocutor, withstanding illiberal and autocratic forces within and beyond the region.

## The Eastern Partnership policy

Within the context of the ongoing political turmoil and the geopolitical complexity exacerbated by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which entered its fourth year, the Eastern Partnership policy has taken up the role of a safeguard, anchoring the EaP countries and their societies to the EU regardless of the

presence, type and depth of bilateral agreement each country has with the EU.

Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine led the European Union to rethink its engagement with the EaP region. In June 2024, Moldova and Ukraine held their first Intergovernmental Conferences with the EU, officially opening accession negotiations and reinforcing their bilateral relations with the EU. This success was largely promoted by the EaP policy, which set the ground for the momentous progress towards EU accession. On the one hand, opening accession negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine marked a landmark moment for their citizens and provided impetus to both countries' internal reform agenda; on the other hand, it added another layer to the already multi-speed EaP policy.

The Eastern Partnership Index 2023, EaP CSF's own monitoring tool, has been tracking EaP countries' approximation and convergence to EU and international norms and standards with regard to both legislative frameworks and implementation – with the latter often being the most critical part of sustainable reform. Since 2011, EaP Index results highlighted increasing stratification between the EaP countries, with some moving towards closer alignment with the EU and others moving away, but this path has not been linear. This is most evident in the case of Moldova and Georgia, as both countries have seen phases of relative progress followed by significant backsliding and then again progress. In the Republic of Moldova, between 2016 and 2020, there were serious concerns regarding the implementation of the Association Agreement over the backsliding in relation to the rule of law, democratic standards and civil society space. Consequently, the EU cut financial assistance to the Republic of Moldova. At present, we witness a similar scenario in Georgia. The government's decision of November 2024 to suspend Georgia's EU accession process until 2028 has triggered widespread peaceful protests, which were met with extremely violent measures, hundreds of arrests, police brutality and repression. Serious concerns have been raised over Georgia's democracy and relationship with the EU.

In both cases, Moldova and Georgia, the lack of political commitment to the EU threatens the implementation of the reforms and EU accession talks. In this context, the EaP policy continues in its role to maintain the EaP countries anchored to EU values and to stimulate democratic change, supporting civil society.

Furthermore, the Policy ensures that the democratic forces of Belarus and Azerbaijan remain connected regionally with democratically minded peers despite 2025 and 2024 elections consolidated Lukashenka and Aliyev's regimes respectively. In Belarus, where over 1,300 people, including civil society representatives and journalists, remain behind bars for politically motivated reasons and where Lukashenka has annihilated all forms of dissent forcing into exile political opposition and civil society, the EaP policy maintains Belarusian

civil society interconnected with the EU and EaP countries and ensures continual cooperation with its representatives, including continued inclusion of Belarusian democratic actors.

In the context of this multi-speed EaP policy, the EaP policy provides synergies with enlargement offering the opportunity to accelerate the internal reform agenda of those countries willing to advance on the EU path and to pursue harmonised agendas for the countries with European aspirations. It is the case of Armenia, where in January 2025 the government endorsed a bill initiating the process to joining the EU. In Armenia, the EaP policy keeps supporting the promotion of democracy, peace, security and stability both bilaterally with the EU and regionally within the EaP.

At the same time, in the EaP countries currently not seeking strong EU integration, the Policy offers civil society and democratic forces with a training ground of approximation with the EU.

At present, the multilateral architecture is underexploited, and better complementarity of EaP multilateral policy format and bilateral agendas should be achieved. Both bilateral and multilateral agendas should be constructed and geared towards transformation. While the bilateral dimension depends on the interests of two parties – although the EU accession process is intergovernmental – the multilateral dimension is the space where to address regional issues. Including, the implementation of rule of law reforms, democratic institutions and security, encompassing both human and energy concerns. Continuing investing in effective rule of law, democratic institutions and security is the only way not only to maintain the investments of the past but also, and most importantly, to secure long-term, sustainable and irreversible change.

Overall, the EaP can claim individual successes but has critical weaknesses that should be addressed and considered for the future. Success in trade and mobility must be evaluated against the backdrop of patchy rule of law reforms, insufficient respect of human rights, widespread corruption. More can be done to strengthen democratic institutions. In this regard, rule of law reforms, judicial vetting and justice reform processes have the capacity to strengthen national authorities, including law enforcement, judicial and banking authorities. This in turn has a direct impact on increasing resilience of the EaP countries, therefore on their capacity to counter cross-border organised crimes, frauds and corruption. Civil society in particular plays a central role in promoting rule of law reforms and monitoring their implementation.

In all EaP countries, consistency is of critical importance when implementing reforms of the judiciary, tackling corruption, money-laundering, and discriminatory

practices or facilitating good working environment for media and civil society. Shaping the EaP policy to primarily stabilise the EaP countries cannot be achieved by conserving existing structures that do not enjoy legitimacy and trust of the citizens.

Another important component of the EaP policy is regional cooperation, between the EU and the EaP region as well as among the EaP countries themselves. Regional cooperation plays a vital role to advance shared goals and strengthen peace and stability in the region. The regional dimension remains complementary with the bilateral relations between the EU and EaP countries, therefore with the enlargement agenda. The EaP policy represents a key tool to advance regional priorities, notably on the above-mentioned rule of law reforms, and on security. A stronger regional cooperation in the field of security, including a human security approach, contributes to democratisation and economic development. In this regard, the EU's engagement with the EaP countries has been targeted towards building the resilience of their societies, both through bilateral engagement and the EaP initiative.

A notable example is Armenia, whose history is shaped by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which has deeply influenced its human security policies. This conflict and its aftermath have required the country to develop expertise in different areas, such as managing displaced populations, ensuring basic human rights and maintaining civil stability. Armenian civil society has been also working actively, for example providing shelter, food security, and psychological support to the refugees who fled the region. Improving security in the EaP and including a human security approach in the EaP region is relevant to all the EaP countries which have active or protracted conflicts on their territory. Echoing the EaP Foreign Ministerial Meeting of December 2023, which provided mandate to strengthen the security dimension of the Eastern Partnership, we at the EaP CSF continue to advocate for the inclusion of a human security approach in the EaP policy.

## Civil society in the Eastern Partnership region

The EaP policy has set a high and unprecedented level of involvement of civil society through its meaningful participation in the EaP policy with relevant stakeholders. The role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) within the formulation, implementation and assessment of the multilateral policy has grown significantly. CSOs' regional network has grown stronger. CSOs have learnt how to address stakeholders and to convince them that the long-term engagement of non-governmental actors promotes the implementation of policies and leads to more sustainable results. Developments over the past years, culminating with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have shown that the EaP countries still

need to invest significant efforts to support sustainable democratic institutions. It is there that EaP civil society has a key role to play as a trusted partner and agent of change.

Civil society remains deeply interconnected in the EaP region, supporting one another in addressing shared challenges, including Russian disinformation and foreign interference, and promoting a shared democratic vision for the future.

Since its launch, the EaP policy has raised the bar for civil society's involvement in both political and policy processes. To this end, the EaP CSF has facilitated connections between the EaP and EU CSOs. The efforts put in place by the EaP CSF through its National Platforms have extensively contributed to solidarity actions by bringing civil society to one table and supporting regional projects. A notable example of solidarity took place following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, where Belarusian civil society operating in the country offered support to their Ukrainian counterparts. Further efforts were taken by civil society from the EaP region, notably Georgian and Moldovan, in supporting their Ukrainian colleagues with relocation. With the current shrinking of civic space in Georgia following the recent starting of the implementation of the Foreign Agent Law and the unfavourable environment for civil society, many Georgian civil society organisations have relocated and reoriented their work abroad, especially in Armenia. The current situation in Georgia has also serious consequences on the several Azerbaijani civil society organisations that were operating via their Georgian intermediaries. This is having an impact on their daily operations and on their interconnection with regional counterparts.

In this context, the EaP multilateral framework offers a mediated space for continuous dialogue and capacity building between state and non-state actors alike, increasing chances for conciliation, reconstruction, rehabilitation, and, hopefully, societal healing. The EaP policy has provided key stakeholders with the knowledge and ability to reach out to their counterparts in the region. Importantly, civil society in the EaP region has acted as the key partner for reform, gathering expertise and providing trainings to authorities. It remains vital to continue supporting civil society's role as a watchdog of effective implementation of rule of law reforms.

The EaP policy should continue to support civil society to bolster these reforms in all EaP countries and to hold authorities accountable no matter what government is elected.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the EaP policy plays a vital role in providing safeguards in times of democratic backsliding, increasing authoritarianisms and democracy

deficiencies, and remains the only channel for civil society to maintain dialogue within the EaP countries and with the European Union.

Over the last years, periods of relative liberalisation have been replaced by more authoritarian trends, and vice-versa, in the EaP region. In Georgia, the current government is facing growing isolation, both internationally and in the country, while employing new forms of pressure against Georgian civil society by weaponised legislation. Georgian civil society and independent media will not be able to continue operating freely in the existing context, and the risk to end up in a Russia-like scenario is extremely high. The EaP policy continues to guarantee engagement between the government and civil society with the aim of holding power accountable, regardless of the country's freezing of EU accession talks.

In the EaP region, civil society remains a trusted interlocutor regardless of any changes in the government. In autumn 2025, parliamentary elections will take place in the Republic of Moldova. Should results of relevant electoral rounds hamper the country's internal reform agenda, the EaP policy will continue supporting civil society's efforts to advocate for democratic transformation.

To continue to advocate for democratic reforms, civil society should continue to receive support within the EaP policy's multilateral track, including through resources allowing civil society to rapidly react to the region's volatile environment, strengthen its role in engaging with governments, improve coordination and leverage public voice's impact.

## Recommendations for an updated Eastern Partnership policy

In the EaP region, civil society acts as a driving force for democratic reforms, and plays a pivotal role as a constant interlocutor, a platform for stakeholder communication within the EaP countries and with the EU. To this end, the EaP CSF recommends the EU and its Member States to:

- Stimulate discussion on the future of the Eastern Partnership, namely its multilateral track, make it complementary to the enlargement agenda and put forward a 'fundamentals' driven agenda in all engagements with EaP countries both with those on the enlargement path and those that do not currently seek strong EU integration,
- Work towards a renewed post-2025 Eastern Partnership policy that continues to prioritise the broad aspect of security through enhancing resilience and information sharing and joint response mechanism. This is key to the overall security of the EaP region and to counter threats on disinformation and foreign interference. Civil society plays a key role in strengthening the ability of the EaP to boost security resilience and should be actively involved,

- Mirror the renewed post-2025 Eastern Partnership policy with a robust revised European Neighbourhood Instrument within the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034,
- Value the strategic importance of the Black Sea for EaP regional cooperation, energy and defence. Embed a comprehensive strategy to the Black Sea region in the EaP policy including economic security of the energy infrastructure, transportation, and data connectivity. Overlapping areas of cooperation between the EaP and instruments in the framework of the Black Sea should be reconsidered,
- Expand EaP regional security cooperation to develop a human security approach that can directly contribute to democratisation, transparency, and accountability in policymaking, facilitating a transition towards governance models that prioritise the interests and involvement of all citizens,
- Promote cooperation with the EaP countries in the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy aimed at stabilising the Eastern Neighbourhood area. This is particularly relevant for civil society and independent media in addressing disinformation and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI),
- Strengthen the intersection between the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the EaP policy towards more cooperation in the framework of the CSDP, mainly on operational capability. In a context of rise of hybrid threats, the EaP contributes to foster stability and security in the region and to promote Common Foreign and Security Policy alignment,
- Invest in projects aimed at strengthening connectivity in the EaP region, such as the implementation of Armenia's Crossroads of Peace, and strengthen synergies with the countries of Central Asia based on economic support in exchange for reforms,
- Commit to organising an EaP political Summit by 2027 laying the foundation for an EaP policy with revised priorities, endorsed by the EU Member States, Partner Countries and civil society. This will be the first EaP political Summit since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine,
- Create a dedicated Working Group on Civic Space within the Eastern Partnership policy as part of the EaP Work Plan. This will address questions on civil society's participation in decision making, regulatory environment and legal frameworks, and access to funding, for a thriving civic space.
- Access to funding became an urgent need for civil society following the

recent USAID funding freeze. The EaP CSF conducted a survey with over 120 organisations working on human rights, media, youth, and think tanks. The survey highlighted that the USAID funding freeze has had a detrimental impact on their activities, including immediate disruptions in project implementation, suspension of capacity-building programs and community engagement initiatives. Many CSOs are struggling to retain key team members or proceeding with important layoffs. In this context of financial uncertainty, it is nearly impossible to plan or implement critical activities. In this regard, a Working Group on Civic Space could explore discussions on core funding and operational grants for EaP CSOs operating in the EaP countries and in exile. This will improve their abilities to build capacity and contribute to the design, implementation and assessment of EaP national laws, raising the bar on civic engagement and support democratic reform at the same time.

- Step up commitment to counter the progressive shrinking and closing of civic space in the EaP countries:
  - Trust and support civil society's expertise and involvement in the EaP policy at all levels through regular consultations, including through inviting civil society organisations and democratic forces instead of representatives of authoritarian regimes to EaP high-level meetings,
  - Strengthen institutional support and capacity building for civil society, including through the creation of dedicated programmes on core funding and operational grants for EaP CSOs operating in the EaP countries and in exile. This will improve their abilities to contribute to the design, implementation and assessment of EaP national laws and to advance reform in the EaP countries.

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum remains convinced of the need and further potential of the EaP policy beyond the enlargement agenda and strongly supports initiatives to provide impetus to a coherent EaP policy post-2025.



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