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# Resilient Democracies in the EaP and EU: Strengthening Civil Societies' Capacities

EaP CSF Working Group 4 Policy Paper

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EASTERN PARTNERSHIP  
**CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM**

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## Abbreviations

**AI** - Artificial Intelligence

**AA** - Association Agreement

**ADB** – Asian Development Bank

**BelNat** - Belarusian National Platform

**CSO** - Civil Society Organisation

**CEPA** - Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement

**DCFTA** - Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas

**EaP** - Eastern Partnership

**ECHR** - European Court of Human Rights

**EU** - European Union

**NGO** - Non-governmental Organisation

**NATO** - North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

**MDF** – Media Development Fund

**UN** - United Nations

## Executive Summary

The role and current state of civil society and EaP priorities post-2020 varies across the six EaP countries. The priorities for the Eastern Partnership (EaP) post-2020 are outlined in the “Joint Communication on the Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020” document, which aims to build a resilient, sustainable, and integrated region. These priorities are framed within the broader context of the EU policies, global challenges, and regional needs, focusing on delivering tangible benefits to the citizens of the EaP countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine).

The backbone of resilient democracies across all EaP states is an informed and strong civil society. During the full-scale war in Ukraine since 2022, civil society has been on the front line supporting the state in wartime. In contrast, Georgian civil society has always been one of the strong actors in defending democratic values and its path to European integration. Moldovan civil society has been pivotal in advancing the country and its European integration. The civil society of Armenia is strong, particularly the EaP CSF Armenian National Platform, which played a crucial role in the foreign policy shift of Armenia, initiated the process of adoption by the Armenian National Parliament the Law on Launching the process of Armenian accession to the European Union. Azerbaijanian civil society’s role is diminishing as the government has imposed significant limitations on its operations. On the other hand, the Belarusian government fails to fulfill human rights and democracy, and the role of civil society is almost non-existent. The operation of NGOs is very limited as the government sees them as an opposition force.

An absolute majority of the respondents from the EaP countries recognize the importance of a strong civil society in the EaP countries for promoting reforms and developing national and regional policies. In most EaP countries all governments have something in common – they are reluctant to accept the policy recommendations or engage with civil society and have a discussion as they mostly view them as opponents. Each country in the EaP has its unique challenges and prospects of development when it comes to non-formal education, digital literacy, building a strong civil society, new models of cooperation with the European Union (EU), the adoption of AI, and digital transformation. All EaP countries face challenges related to infrastructure, citizen-centered policies, and the digital divide between the urban and rural areas as rural areas are often left with limited access to digital tools.

While the level of cooperation with the EU varies, there is a growing recognition of the EU’s support for democratic reforms, trade, and regional development in general. Some countries, particularly Belarus and Azerbaijan, have more complex relations with the EU due to political and strategic interests paired with the authoritarian nature of the ruling regimes in these countries. Civil society plays a crucial role in advocating social programs, namely non-formal education and digital literacy, especially in countries where the state does not provide needed support and services.

**Keywords:** EaP, Resilience, Civil Society, EU.

## Introduction

The main driving force of pluralistic liberal democracies is an informed, active, and resilient civil society, which plays a critical role in promoting democratic values, bridging social divides, and fighting against the political authoritarianism that undermines reforms, progress, and overall improvement of quality of life. Over the past three decades, six Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries which include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, suffered from frozen conflicts, war, ethnic cleansings, corruption, disruptive internal and foreign policies, weak democratic institutions, authoritarian tendencies, civil society oppression, and many more. The shared history took its toll on all countries and rendered them with common challenges. Some countries succeeded in establishing a relatively stronger nation-state, while others continued to struggle. Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Armenia have made steady progress over the last decade while Azerbaijan and Belarus have been under the influence of the imperialistic giant; however, it is worth noting that since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Armenia has made a shift to the European path and continues to drive its country towards the West by holding a referendum on the EU membership (Krikorian, 2025). Meanwhile, Georgian people have been fighting authoritarian regimes and civil society has been a driving force of change. In all six countries, over the years, the space for civil society to operate and advocate for social and political change has been very challenging. That paired with geopolitical and security challenges in the EaP region has underscored the importance of security, peace, and prosperity in Europe as a whole. The post-2020 priorities aim to achieve the five long-term objectives for increasing resilience in the EaP countries which are economic, institutional, societal, green, and digital. The framework emphasizes "Delivering for Citizens" through measurable and impactful initiatives, aligning with the EU's geopolitical strategy and the interests of EaP countries.

The quality of domestic governance in the EaP region carries the utmost importance for the European Union. The launch of the Eastern Partnership in 2009, as an extension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), aimed to promote EU values and norms, ensure citizen-centred policy transfer and align regulatory systems with the EU standards (Council of the European Union, 2009). This was particularly relevant as former Soviet Union countries had different objectives and policies. The EU provided instruments such as visa liberalization, Association Agreement (AA), and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA). "Implementation of the AA/DCFTA accompanied by the reforms will bring full harmonization with the legislation and the standards leading to the gradual economic integration of the partners on the EU internal market and thus creating an economic space of the EU" (Council of the European Union, 2015). Of those six countries, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia have benefited largely from AA and DCFTA, while Armenia - from the CEPA agreement with the EU.

The European Parliament Resolution concerning the review of the European Neighborhood Policy emphasised the "importance of supporting the civil society and the role of the civil society in examining expenditures for EU assistance in EaP countries" (European Parliament, 2015). Thus, it was important to accelerate political association and economic development. This is only possible with a functioning, engaged, growth-

oriented government and civil society that seeks progress and development. Such change should come from within and cannot be coerced from other countries.

Above all, civil society is key to ensuring participatory policymaking by suggesting new initiatives, promoting shared values, holding governments accountable, fostering sustainable development, protecting human rights, and ensuring fundamental freedoms. In the post-Soviet bloc, the existence of a strong civil society is especially important as it defends the rights of marginalised groups, critically assesses governmental reforms, at times, provides services that the state cannot. It also informs society with unbiased and evidence-based information and has leverage over the power of the state to advocate, influence, and scrutinise governmental actions and decisions. Additionally, civil society ensures free and fair elections and always safeguards the democratic processes in the countries.

A strong civil society as a pillar of democracy in EaP can exist only if citizens are educated, informed, and resilient. This can be achieved through non-formal/informal education, which in most countries is accessible through donor-supported programming, where minority groups and refugees are included in the services. Clear and consistent communication from the EU with a clear vision and individually tailored strategy for each EaP country, is essential for fostering innovation and sustainable development. The policy paper explores how informal and non-formal education can strengthen civil society across different EaP countries by promoting civic engagement and media literacy to fight dis/misinformation, particularly among marginalised groups, including minorities and refugees. It also examines what could be the new models of cooperation between the EaP countries and the EU to ensure civil society's involvement in decision-making. Lastly, the paper analyses the initiatives that can foster mutual understanding across different demographics, specifically youth and seniors, and how lifelong learning, supported by AI and digital transformation can contribute to the sustainable development of EaP countries.

## Methodology

This policy paper is descriptive and analytical, emphasizing the importance of civil society, the communication tools used by the EU and the six EaP partners, and the challenges faced by civil society. The paper explores three main dimensions:

- **Democratic resilience and civic engagement:** The role of non-formal/informal education and empowerment of marginalised groups, such as minorities and refugees, and how media literacy can be leveraged to combat mis/disinformation.
- **Rethinking EaP:** New ways of communication between the EU and EaP, ways to enhance regional cooperation to ensure participation of civil society in decision-making and countering anti-democratic and autocratic tendencies. Additionally, education initiatives can bridge the gaps between youth and seniors.
- **Lifelong learning and Innovation:** the role of lifelong learning in sustainable development and digital transformation.

The study employs qualitative research methodology including content and comparative analysis. Data sources include a literature review of books, reports from the European Parliament, European Council, and European Commission, as well as publications from the Civil Society Forum of the EaP, specialised articles, and other relevant documents. For the data collection, 13 online interviews with the CSF delegates were conducted (see Charts 1 and 2), and an online survey was disseminated among the CSF members, resulting in 37 individual responses (26 in English and 11 in Russian) from six EaP countries and EU-based organizations. The survey included both open-ended and multiple-choice questions.

The in-depth interviews and survey questionnaire were structured into three thematic blocks:

- **Block I:** Democratic Resilience and Civic Engagement
- **Block II:** Rethinking EaP – new ways of communication between EaP countries and EaP and EU
- **Block III:** Lifelong Learning and Innovation

Each of the blocks consisted of 4-5 open-ended questions, with the same thematic focus applied to both interviews and surveys.

#	Country	Number of interview conducted
1	Armenia	2
2	Azerbaijan	2
3	Belarus	2
4	Georgia	3
5	Moldova	2
6	Ukraine	2

Chart 1. Interviews conducted with EaP CSF delegates

#	Country	Number of survey responses
1	Armenia	4
2	Azerbaijan	6
6	Belarus	5
3	Georgia	6
4	Moldova	9
5	Ukraine	4
7	EU	3

Chart 2. Results of the survey conducted with EaP CSF members



The selection criteria of the participants were as follows: the CSO representatives interviewed were CSF delegate organisations, and the online survey was conducted with EaP CSF members.

## **Research limitations**

### **Inaccurate statistics and a lack of material**

One significant limitation encountered during the research was the scarcity of literature and statistics overall. Desk research relied on studies conducted by various organisations at different times, complicating the analysis of regional contexts using consistent criteria. Furthermore, the existing studies are outdated and fail to accurately reflect the current situation. Additionally, the statistics available are imprecise and outdated, posing challenges to quantitative data analysis and hindering a comprehensive understanding of the severity of the issues examined.

### **Representativeness**

The information shared through interviews and surveys does not allow for generalization at a country-wide level. However, responses from interviews and surveys from the same country often echoed with each other, indicating a prevailing trend. Despite the active and motivated nature of study participants, the findings cannot be assumed to represent broader national perspectives. Furthermore, since interviews and surveys were conducted exclusively with CSF member organisations, the study does not capture the full range of opinions from all CSOs operating in each country.

# 01

**Overview of the current state  
of play**

## Overview of the current state of play

### Armenia

#### Civil Society as a Driving Force

Armenia has been actively engaging in the EU's post-2020 agenda, focusing on key priorities such as resilience, governance, and economic development. Several support packages have been implemented or are in progress to launch cooperation between Armenia and the EU. The signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2017, which fully entered into force in 2021, deepened the bilateral cooperation, facilitated the establishment of a civilian mission for peace and security between the war-torn territories, and started visa liberalization negotiations (European Council, 2024). While Armenia is trying to overcome geopolitical vulnerability and isolation, its pro-European civil society is trying to build a more resilient country. Civil society plays a crucial role in Armenia's democratic consolidation and development. As a small landlocked country with limited natural resources, Armenia relies on effective human capital involvement and the productive utilization of its workforce (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2024).

Armenian civil society relied on two main tools to communicate with the government. The first has been large-scale civic movements and protests triggered by issues like environmental concerns, urban planning, privatization of public spaces, and economic challenges such as energy price hikes and pension reforms (Asian Development Bank (ADB) 2021). These movements were reactive, short-term, and situational but demonstrated significant public engagement and activism levels. The second tool was civil society advocacy, linked to the government's international commitments, particularly through the EU's Eastern Partnership. This allowed CSOs to push for EU-supported reforms, often using international organisations as intermediaries, reducing the risk of direct government retaliation (Asian Development Bank (ADB) 2021). The main actors among the civil society groups are the local and international NGOs, interviewees stated that a lot of resources are put into the development of CSO's capacities in Armenia, however, many still lack management and strategic planning skills, an issue also mentioned in the survey responses.

#### Civil Society and Non-formal Education

Civil society to this day in Armenia plays a pivotal role in bringing non-formal education to the communities, developing critical thinking skills, and promoting civic and human rights education. Interviews and survey responses reiterated the importance of these efforts, as they are vital in fostering democratic engagement in Armenia, especially among youth and minorities in regions where the rule of law has limited everyday relevance. While the education system lacks focus on critical thinking and civic engagement opportunities, CSOs provide a safe space for young people to learn, connect, and grow, especially in remote areas. Without such efforts, democracy risks remaining an abstract and misunderstood concept for many citizens. The interviewees

stated that a lot of resources are put into the development of CSO's capacities in Armenia, however, many still lack management and strategic planning skills – an issue also mentioned in the survey responses.

### **Digital Literacy in Armenia**

Despite some programmes for youth and seniors on countering disinformation and propaganda have been in place, the survey respondents stressed the need for more hands-on, practical programmes and workshops. Internet accessibility remains an issue across the country, and there is a need for a government-led legal framework on media hygiene (Council of Europe (n.d.)). Even though the Digitalization Strategy of Armenia developed and is one of the parties of the Budapest Convention, alongside Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine,) there is a need for more comprehensive cyber legislation. It is also crucial to include digital literacy in the school curriculum to work on the relevant skills from early on ((Council of Europe, n.d.)

### **Vulnerable Segment of Armenians**

Another challenge is inclusivity in social and educational training programmes, particularly for minorities, Internally Displaced People (IDPs) from war-affected border regions of Armenia, and refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh. Respondents identified language barriers as a primary obstacle to participation in education and social initiatives. However, Armenia benefits from a large and active diaspora that has been at the forefront of strengthening the country's civil society (Asian Development Bank (ADB 2021). Surveyed civil society representatives believe the EU's top priority should be aligning education system reforms with labor market needs to enhance human capital development, which would also allow IDPs to integrate more effectively. Most interviewees shared that non-formal education is directly connected with having a strong civil society and CSOs have the power to alter society into a more resilient institution which is important for driving the democratic processes.

## **Azerbaijan**

### **Limited Rights of Civil Society in Azerbaijan**

The EaP post-2020 agenda emphasizes recovery, resilience, and reform to strengthen partner countries through investments in governance and economic development. In Azerbaijan, the implementation of these priorities has been negatively influenced by the government's approach to CSOs. The operational environment for CSOs in Azerbaijan remains challenging due to the restrictive laws and policies currently in place. While the Constitution of Azerbaijan defines the Republic of Azerbaijan as a democratic, law-governed, secular, unitary republic with a separation of powers, the reality is different (The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan n.d). The NGO sector is primarily regulated by the Law on Non-Governmental Organisations (Law on NGOs), the Law on Grants, and several decisions of the Cabinet of Ministers (Republic of Azerbaijan, 2011). Complex and burdensome registration procedures present a formidable barrier for those who wish to form and operate NGOs. It is difficult to register as either a domestic or international NGO in Azerbaijan. The Government of Azerbaijan has lost at least 32

cases before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which has found denials of registration to violate the freedom of association (European Court of Human Rights, 2024). NGOs also encounter difficulties in complying with informal requests to obtain a permit from the presidential administration and local authorities to carry out activities in the regions. It's important to note that the effectiveness of the EaP initiatives in Azerbaijan is closely linked to the government's willingness to engage with and support civil society. The reports show that unprecedented repressions have been taking place against media, experts, and NGO representatives which was confirmed by the interviews as well (Protect Defenders, 2024). It is worth mentioning that the rights of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh to return to their homes and ensure their security and rights are of utmost importance. Azerbaijan needs to be accountable for the ethnic cleansing made in Nagorno-Karabakh by the Azerbaijani troops in the presence with so-called Russian Peacekeepers (European Parliament, 2023).

## **A Lack of Non-formal Education Opportunities**

Government control over funding and operations severely restricts NGOs in Azerbaijan, leading to the closure of many independent organisations since 2015. Strict legal approvals limit foreign funding, forcing most remaining NGOs to function as government-controlled entities (GONGOs) that promote state narratives. Additionally, freedoms of expression, media, and assembly are tightly controlled, with protests often met with aggression and arrests (Eurasianet, 2014).

As the survey results highlighted, some programmes focus on “insensitive topics” such as business and entrepreneurship, social issues, and environmental protection. According to both interviewees and survey respondents, non-formal education is limited and primarily supported by government-backed grants, with some organisations engaging actively alongside national and international donors. Nonetheless, those organisations that can operate continue to play a crucial role in providing access to information and fostering civic engagement, especially among youth and minorities. It promotes critical thinking, analytical skills, and independent decision-making while encouraging participation in formal decision-making processes. Such education enhances media literacy, enabling individuals to navigate the digital landscape, identify credible sources, and engage in media critique.

Since 2015, access to foreign funding for domestic NGOs in Azerbaijan has been seriously impeded, as the Government has introduced restrictive requirements for donor registration, registration of foreign grants, service contracts, and donations. As a result, hundreds of NGOs have been left without substantial funding and thousands of skilled professionals have left the sector. The funding restrictions reflect an often mistrustful and hostile government attitude toward NGOs. Currently, the NGO sector is partially financed through public funding mechanisms, which provide small grants to NGOs (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law [ICNL], 2024). Despite these challenges, over the last decade, Azerbaijani students and academic staff continued to benefit from EU-funded Erasmus+ educational exchanges (European Commission, 2020).

Overall, due to the current situation in the country and the way the NGO sector is treated in Azerbaijan, it is difficult to assess the progress and discuss prospects as long as the oppressive regime remains in power.

### **Access to Resources in Azerbaijan**

Based on the interviews conducted, the respondents stated that the high-speed internet in Azerbaijan has become more accessible in recent years, bridging the rural and urban divide in the country. The government-sponsored initiative “Online Azerbaijan Project” significantly improved accessibility in the country and it aimed to connect all households and businesses in the country to broadband by the end of 2024 (Ministry of Digital Development and Transport of the Republic of Azerbaijan, n.d.). This to an extent allowed the popularization of lifelong learning programmes, however, there is still not very high interest. Those programmes are now offered at different educational institutions such as ADA University, Azerbaijan Technical University (AzTu), and Azerbaijan State Economic University (UNEC). They offer online and in-person courses, however, the demand for those courses remains low, as the interview participants shared. The reason for that is that society is not well-informed about the programmes and there is a demand for a university degree. There is a need for those programmes to be popularized and employers to value certification/degree programmes as much as university diplomas.

## **Belarus**

### **Civil Society Oppression in Belarus**

The presidential election held in Belarus on January 26, 2024, extended Alexander Lukashenko’s authoritarian rule, which has now surpassed four decades. This election was conducted in a non-competitive environment, characterized by systemic repression and the absence of genuine opposition. The political landscape in Belarus is severely constrained due to the government’s response to the mass protests that followed the contested 2020 election, however, Belarusians are demonstrating resilience in sustaining their pro-European movement while civil society has largely been pushed into exile. The lack of opposition and absence of public protests highlight the effectiveness of the government’s crackdown (CIVICUS, 2025).

Political unrest and state violence have forced many activists to seek safety abroad, fearing political persecution marked by the constant risk of arrest, detention, harassment, invasive searches, or even the loss of parental rights. Additionally, unemployment resulting from political views or the forced shutdown of NGOs and media outlets has further intensified the pressure. The interview respondent stated that after the 2020 elections, operating as an independent NGO in Belarus became almost impossible. As a result, many activists sought refuge in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine, where they would continue their work. The interview respondents reiterated the need for non-formal education but opportunities for such education remain extremely limited. Survey participants stated that most initiatives in this sector primarily collaborate with national ministries, while engagement with local governments remains a significant challenge. However, until 2020, some degree of cooperation was maintained with

various ministries in Lithuania. Since 2020, and particularly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, addressing misinformation and disinformation has become a key priority for international donors.

On the other hand, NGOs provide limited assistance, offering soft skills courses for youth and women funded by rare grants, membership fees, or limited support from UN agencies and Western donors such as the EU and the US. However, the prohibition of bank transfers between Belarus and the EU poses additional challenges to financial sustainability and international collaboration. Survey participants confirmed that CSOs are very limited in their activities, however, the Belarusian national platform can work closely with NGOs and deliver the programmes that are crucial for the disadvantaged population of the country. The Belarusian National Platform (BelNat Platform) is a key structure within the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF). It brings together civil society organisations from the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine along with EU-based organisations, to promote democracy, human rights, and European integration (Ministry for Emergency Situations of the Republic of Belarus, 2001).

The BelNat Platform serves as the Belarusian national coordination body within this framework, uniting independent civil society actors, human rights organisations, and pro-democracy initiatives. Despite increasing repression, the platform continues to facilitate dialogue, advocate for democratic reforms, and provide support to Belarusian civil society both inside the country and in exile. Given the Belarusian government's crackdown on independent organisations, the BelNat Platform plays a crucial role in maintaining civic engagement and connecting Belarusian democratic forces with international partners.

Interviews revealed that young Belarusians are generally more informed and proactive, often engaging in protests and democratic efforts. Conversely, older generations, while active in earlier protests, remain more susceptible to misinformation and disinformation campaigns. These generational differences highlight the need for tailored approaches to education and outreach. Several exiled organisations continue providing online programmes for Belarusians, including language courses, skills development, and other educational resources for Belarusians abroad. Digital technologies are used by the state to create new surveillance mechanisms, track internet activity, deanonymize users, and interfere with their privacy.

## **Freedom of Expression**

The media landscape in Belarus is very constrained. Media freedom in Belarus has been systematically suppressed through restrictive laws and repression of independent journalism (. Following the 2020 presidential election, the situation worsened, with journalists facing harassment, imprisonment, and censorship, while civil society organisations were forcibly shut down. Despite the regime's crackdown, Belarusians increasingly rely on independent online media, though the government continues to tighten restrictions in response. The European Union actively supports independent media and civil society in Belarus, and in 2022, it will increase to 25 million euros in financial aid to counter repression and promote press freedom (Przetacznik & Tothova,

2022). Digital platforms and social media have become vital tools for Belarusian opposition politicians, activists, and independent media, particularly since the 2020 election protests. Initiatives like Voice and Honest People, along with Telegram channels, have facilitated mobilization, information dissemination, and financial aid for political prisoners. While the Belarusian regime has also entered the digital space to spread propaganda, intimidate dissidents, and counter opposition narratives, independent media remains a crucial link between exiled opposition leaders and supporters in Belarus. The growing role of technology in Belarusian political life underscores the digitalization of both democratic resistance and authoritarian control (Rudnik, 2023). Many educational materials have been banned in Belarus, further complicating efforts to combat false narratives. The repressive regime, bolstered by Russian support, has fostered a totalitarian state where dissent is suppressed. Currently, cybersecurity remains a major concern, especially with risks from Russian and Chinese technologies. Without secure digital tools, activists face imprisonment. Licensing, copyright issues, and Belarus's absence from the Budapest Convention further expose CSOs to state-controlled cyber surveillance and suppression (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

## **Mobility of Belarusians**

Visa restrictions imposed by European countries, including the Schengen zone, have further isolated Belarusians (European Union & Republic of Belarus, 2020). While humanitarian visas are sometimes issued, opportunities to leave the country remain limited. Government programmes in Belarus largely serve as propaganda tools, with significant financial backing from Russia. These initiatives include militarized youth and children's camps, which reinforce imperialistic narratives. Despite the challenging political environment, the EU Delegation for Belarus still operates, with its operational department relocated to Brussels. Programmes are now coordinated remotely, maintaining communication with diplomatic, civil society, and advocacy groups. Annual consultations between EU representatives and Belarusian stakeholders - political forces, media, CSOs, human rights advocates, and businesses help shape the EU's funding strategy for Belarus. The EU currently allocates approximately €30 million annually to CSOs from Belarus with €16 million directed toward youth exchange and education programmes (European Commission, 2024). Youth programmes remain a priority within EU funding, reflecting the increasing engagement of young Belarusians in democratic activities.

## **Georgia**

### **Political Turbulence and Democratic Downfall**

Georgia has been one of the leading EaP members in aligning with the EU standards, with its constitution mandating a commitment to EU integration. However, the current government has significantly derailed Georgia from its path to EU integration, bringing the country closer to the Russian authoritarian system (Civic IDEA, 2024). Key setbacks include a lack of an independent justice system; passing the "Law of Georgia on the Transparency of Foreign Influence", commonly referred to as the "Foreign Agent Law",



which restricts civil society activities (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights [ODIHR], 2023). Suppression of civil society and critical voices; violent crackdowns on peaceful protests have become an everyday occurrence since the 2024 elections. The government after the elections openly stated that negotiation talks on EU accession will be paused until 2028 (Parulava, 2024). The EU is alarmed by the worsened situation and democratic backsliding in Georgia (European Parliament, 2024).  
CSOs Supporting Vulnerable Segment in Georgia

Following the adoption of the so-called “Foreign Agent Law, many CSOs have faced significant restrictions in delivering educational and social programmes, particularly for vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, seniors, and youth. While the government is quickly moving away from supporting human rights, gender equality, and generally democratic standards, civil society struggles to keep the donor-funding programmes running, leading to fewer resources for non-formal/informal education, vital for an informed society (Asian Development Bank, 2019). In Georgia, NGOs are vital in delivering non-formal education, benefiting tens of thousands of citizens. They empower young people socially and politically, consolidate community members around shared interests, and facilitate civic activism, advocacy, and emancipation campaigns through teaching unorthodox disciplines that are not taught in a formal education setting. Lifelong learning plays a critical role in Georgia’s development, particularly in building digital skills across generations. Initiatives such as DVV Academy are actively engaging senior citizens, but a broader effort is necessary to train specialists and integrate digital systems nationwide (DVV International, n.d.). Awareness of adult non-formal education in Georgia is low, with minimal state regulation and limited public participation. A DVVI report highlights the lack of recognition of lifelong learning’s value and benefits (DVV International, 2020). Survey participants highlighted the following points: the overall need for increased investment in regional cooperation programmes, targeting both university and school students; specialist training and infrastructure development to integrate digital learning nationwide; spaces for youth and seniors to engage in joint discussions on EU integration or organizing intergenerational cultural events, such as exhibitions, festivals, or performances, that highlight EU-related themes and encourage cross-generational participation.

## **Digital Transformation**

Access to technology has improved in Georgia, enabling better information dissemination, yet active participation is still limited (PMC Research Center 2023). While high-speed internet is available in the country, internet access remains a challenge in the high mountains of Georgia (OECD, 2023). Organisations such as the Media Development Fund (MDF) have been actively working on combating mis/disinformation, however, efforts often fail to reach certain segments of the population, especially older individuals who are more susceptible to disinformation (Media Development Foundation, n.d.). Traditional media could play a stronger role in countering propaganda but lacks independence, therefore, non-formal education is essential in addressing the issue on the regional level (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2021). Media literacy is absent from the formal education curriculum, leaving CSOs to fill the gap through informal education initiatives. While various organisations and media schools have implemented effective

programmes, including training on misinformation and engaging ethnic minorities, there is a need for increased donor funding and specialist training. The interviews with regional CSO representatives revealed that for instance, regions such as Samtskhe-Javakheti remain less active, with historical and cultural factors contributing to low civic engagement. Ethnic minorities, including Greeks and Armenians residing in this region, often prioritize stability over activism, and while language barriers are decreasing, integration and intercultural dialogue remain weak. They are also more prone to believe mis/disinformation, rendering them in an even more vulnerable position.

## Republic of Moldova

As a small state near a dominant power, Moldova has spent over three decades balancing relations with Russia, which sees post-Soviet states as part of its sphere of influence. The Moldovan government has set an ambitious goal of becoming an EU member state by 2030. Nestled between Romania, and war-torn Ukraine, Moldova has fundamental geopolitical implications. The pro-European president, Maia Sandu, who was elected for a second term in office, is being challenged by several pro-Russian opposition candidates (Hedenskog, 2024). EU stays committed to supporting Moldova in its EU integration process, since its independence the largest financial assistance package was given to Moldova, amounting to €1.8 billion over three years, to be invested in growth-oriented sectors, and public services such as infrastructure, energy, and business development. Moldova is deeply divided between pro-EU and pro-Russian camps, a split intensified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. About half the population, including most of the diaspora, supports the EU, while a third favors Russia, with higher concentrations in Transnistria, Gagauzia, and northern Moldova. The remaining 10-15% are centrists, favoring ties with both (Hedenskog, 2024).

### CSOs in Moldova

In Moldova, CSOs contribute significantly to soft skill development through non-formal and informal learning opportunities for both youth and adults. They offer critical services that bridge the gap between learning and employment, and support processes that acquired skills translate into meaningful work opportunities. CSOs actively engage in raising awareness and advocating for skill development and employment issues through non-formal education within the community. Since signing the 2014 EU Association Agreement, Moldova has focused on modernizing education, enhancing quality and access, and developing a national qualifications framework for transparency and recognition. Formal and non-formal education is a central national priority in Moldova, focusing on fostering democratic values, human rights, and the development of human capital (European Training Foundation 2021). The respondents stated that non-formal and informal education initiatives are crucial for fostering democratic participation across all social groups, as well as that CSOs play a crucial role in promoting non-formal education through training, discussions, and debates, although these efforts remain sporadic and unstructured without clear strategies. Activities such as training workshops, public debates, and educational games help citizens understand their civic rights and responsibilities, enhance their critical thinking and communication skills, and engage in local decision-making. Additionally, experience exchanges, cultural

events, and volunteering promote solidarity and cooperation, which are vital for a healthy democracy. Non-formal education is seen as a priority by the government and that is reflected in, extending beyond elections to include participation in meetings, consultations, and ongoing government contact. Legally, knowledge gained through non-formal education is recognized and considered for employment (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [Cedefop], 2023).

Despite some strong NGOs in this field, youth participation in elections remains low, with older generations being more pro-Russian. Moldova's democratization struggles stem from a generational divide between politically active, pro-Western youth and older, pro-communist voters nostalgic for socialism. While young activists use social media and protests to push for change, older generations influence politics through elections, prioritizing social and economic stability (Dragoman & Luca, 2019).

Both governmental and CSO representatives collaborate in working groups, influencing decision-making across sectors like education, youth, innovation, and research (European Training Foundation, 2023). The change in leadership over the past four years brought a more open approach to civil society, with regular meetings between CSOs and the government. Platforms for participation are available for various groups, including youth, seniors, Roma, and people with disabilities, though only 50% of engagement is related to other issues, as stated by the interview participants. Greater attention is needed to address the empowerment and integration of these groups, as well as to combat stereotypes and provide better access to information and services.

## **Lifelong Learning Opportunities in Moldova**

The situation for lifelong learning in Moldova is showing positive progress by having an educational framework with EU standards in force, with effective communication strengthening the connection between civil society and the EU, and more resources supporting the promotion of European values (European Education and Culture Executive Agency [EACEA], 2023). Although some initiatives are supported by international donors, there is a lack of specific programmes, and the concept of lifelong learning is still new to Moldova, with initiatives such as those from DVV International in the early stages. In 2024 UNICEF and UNDP, with financial backing from the European Union and in partnership with Moldova's Ministry of Education and Research, launched the "Advancing Quality Education and Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All" programme. With a €10 million budget, the initiative aims to modernize Moldova's education system by strengthening teacher training, enhancing digital skills, renovating schools, and improving access to education, especially for disadvantaged children. Key actions include establishing the National Institute for Education and Leadership, creating model schools, providing school buses, and fostering STEAM skills (UNICEF Moldova, 2024). UNICEF will support digitalization and inclusive education, while UNDP will focus on infrastructure improvements, ICT resources, and career orientation. The programme underscores the EU's commitment to Moldova's educational reform as part of its European integration efforts.

## Digital Vulnerability in Moldova

Moldova's rural and economically disadvantaged regions lack essential digital infrastructure, including high-speed internet and modern technology, hindering online education. Many schools have outdated wiring, limited power sources, and insufficient digital tools, making digital learning difficult. Additionally, low-income students often cannot afford personal devices or internet access, deepening educational inequality. Economic hardship may also force some students to work, increasing dropout rates and limiting their educational opportunities (Tigranyan, 2024).

Many adults lack basic digital skills, which hinders their ability to access digital learning platforms and AI resources, making it harder for them to engage in lifelong learning programmes (European Association for the Education of Adults [EAEA], 2020). The survey respondents stated that traditional cultural attitudes and mental resistance may create skepticism toward new technologies, with some people preferring conventional learning methods. Concerns about job loss due to automation or the fear of being replaced by technology can further fuel this resistance. Moreover, educational institutions and training centers often lack AI-based platforms or sufficient digital infrastructure, and there is a shortage of localized content tailored to diverse demographic groups. High costs associated with AI technologies, staff training, and digital content development, as well as subscription fees for online learning platforms, may exclude participation from low-income individuals. The harsh reality shows that 460,607 Moldovan households do not own a personal computer, and 445,822 Moldavian households don't have access to the internet. This to an extent widens the gap of accessibility to resources (International Telecommunication Union [ITU] & United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2021).

## Ukraine

Ukraine has faced Russian aggression since 2014 when the Russian Federation illegally annexed Crimea and occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. This escalated into a Russian full-scale invasion that has been ongoing since February 24, 2022. Despite major war-related sufferings and challenges, civil society has played a key role in maintaining resilience, assisting in humanitarian efforts, and driving reforms. The shift toward a more open and de-bureaucratized Ukrainian government, aligned with a constructive and cooperative civil society, has significantly increased public trust in the government. However, this change remains fragile, as society has high expectations for accelerated reforms during and after the war, alongside further integration with the EU and NATO. The interview participants stated that one of the primary concerns among both civil society and government actors is that any stagnation in reforms could lead to political instability, as well as that Russian disinformation campaigns could exploit frustrations to weaken public confidence in institutions.

### Civil Society and Media in a War-Torn Ukraine

Ukraine's pluralistic media landscape has traditionally enabled CSOs to manage public expectations and influence societal perceptions despite a murky media ownership structure. The survey participants stated that many media outlets were historically

aligned with political parties, using media for political gain; Since the invasion and martial law, nine major media channels have aligned to form a “United News Telemarathon” to provide urgent news and promote unity in the war effort, but criticism of the government and political disagreements have become taboo (Soldatiuk-Westerveld, Deen, & van Steenbergen, 2023). A similar initiative called “FreeDom” targets the Russian-speaking population, with media content regulated by the government (Freedom House, 2023). While some criticize this approach, media outlets participating in the Telemarathon are reluctant to end it due to financial dependence on state funding. Although the restriction on media freedom has helped maintain unity and counter Russian disinformation, it presents a significant challenge to the free media environment needed for civil society to act as a bridge between the government and the public. The Telemarathon also risks marginalizing political opponents, favoring representatives of the ruling party. For civil society participation to thrive, Ukraine needs to develop a strategy for transitioning back to a more pluralistic media landscape with independent, self-sustaining media outlets ((Soldatiuk-Westerveld, Deen, & van Steenbergen, 2023).

In Ukraine, the Civil Society Forum (CSF) has been a positive example for sharing trends across EaP countries, however, there is a need for smaller, more focused meetings instead of large conferences, with clear goals and participation from both grassroots organisations and EU representatives.

## **Youth Amidst War**

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, profoundly affected Ukrainian youth, with 82% experiencing losses, including income, mental health deterioration, and strained relationships, while 20% became internally displaced. Before the war, youth concerns centered on economic stability, crime, and corruption, but access to basic needs and mental health support have since become primary issues. The war has reshaped youth attitudes toward civic engagement, national identity, and political ideology. Previously perceived as politically disengaged, many young Ukrainians were skeptical of political leaders and held mixed views on the EU, with 60% supporting membership but one-third distrusting the bloc. Despite past optimism, by 2021, 40% were open to emigration, driven by limited opportunities and inadequate public resources (Martínez et al., 2023). The survey participants stated that it is also crucial to foster direct connections with EU officials, particularly for advocacy and cooperation with Ukrainian and Moldovan citizens and CSOs, supported by joint projects and analytical activities.

Ukrainian civil society along with diaspora has been actively preparing to assist in what they hope will be a recovery and reconstruction process characterized by unparalleled transparency and accountability. They have formed new coalitions of CSOs aimed at leveraging the country’s commitment to transparent digitalization to create new data systems that will ensure the responsible management of a Marshall Plan for Ukraine. International donors should enhance their collaboration with these Ukrainian CSOs (Rudolph et al., 2023).

## **Non-formal Education in Ukraine**

The interview and online survey participants state that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine faced an education crisis, with an outdated, colonial education system focused on theory rather than practicality. Non-formal education has become crucial for young people, especially in areas like human rights, democracy, and critical thinking. Despite bureaucratic barriers in formal education, informal learning provides opportunities to develop both soft and hard skills. Youth participation in civil society is strong, with volunteering and social activism prevalent, though political activism and national engagement are limited. Local CSOs are growing, with grassroots organisations and decentralized governance playing a role (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2018). However, there is a shortage of civic education specialists, and IDPs (internally displaced persons) from 2022 missed out on non-formal education opportunities, despite receiving humanitarian aid.

The younger generation has had a significant influence on the older generation, promoting European values and shifting attitudes on issues like migration, gender roles, and religion. As the interview participants stated, there is a demand for training, especially for refugees, who need courses to improve their soft skills. Despite improvements in internet access before the war, there is still a lack of professionals and knowledge, particularly on how to handle misinformation and disinformation.

## **AI and Security Challenges**

War has had a significant influence on limiting access to the internet and telecommunication across Ukraine. Access now condemns Russia's digital occupation of Ukraine's Kherson region, where authorities have blocked independent media, social platforms, and Ukrainian cellular networks, forcing residents onto Russian-controlled services for surveillance (Access Now, 2023). Other non-Russia-controlled regions experience frequent blackouts and limited access to the internet and telecommunication. To respond to the volatile situation in Ukraine, a series of actions were taken to advance UA in digital and cyberspace. The Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine is actively advancing artificial intelligence (AI) across various sectors. Recently, it established a dedicated AI unit with plans to develop a national large language model (LLM) to integrate AI solutions into government operations and key areas such as defense, medicine, education, and business (Danshyna, 2025). To guide responsible AI development, the Ministry published a roadmap for AI regulation in October 2023, emphasizing a bottom-up approach that encourages self-regulation among businesses and attention to citizens' digital rights and data privacy (Expert Committee on the Development of Artificial Intelligence, 2023). Additionally, the Ministry has issued recommendations for the responsible use of AI in the media (Ministry of Digital Transformation, 2024). In the defense sector, the Ministry is fostering the use of AI-driven technologies, including uncrewed ground vehicles and AI-targeting drones, to enhance military capabilities (Balmforth, 2024).

Generally, incorporating AI always raises concerns about transparency and compliance, especially when replacing human decision-making. AI must be safe, trustworthy, reliable, and act with integrity (European Parliamentary Research Service [EPRS], 2020).

# 02

## **Policy Considerations**

## Policy Considerations

### Armenia

- Implement joint activities within the EaP region and outside of the region with other EU institutions, amplify efforts to focus on digital literacy skills development from an early age by integrating the relevant programming in the school curriculum. There is a need for relevant policy reforms that mitigate the spread of fake information. Also, there is a lack of professionals who know about media literacy.
- More attention should be paid to involving the IDP population and refugees in different educational programmes.
- There should be more non-formal education training in a place that supports not only the capacity building of the professionals but also youth and elderly as they are the most vulnerable to this information warfare.
- There is a need for training professionals who understand digital hygiene well to ensure knowledge transfer and sharing of good practices to create more informed and resilient generations including seniors. Also, the basic course of media literacy should be incorporated into the school curriculum.
- There is a need for the cyber security policy to be elaborated in Armenia which will be in alignment with the EU to better cope with cybercrimes.
- There is a need for NGO capacity development programming that aims at NGOs becoming more self-reliant.
- Support the establishment of life-long learning programmes and continuous professional education, based on experience sharing with EU countries. Also, promote their importance for the demand for those programmes to grow and gain traction.
- Ensure the inclusion of different CSO actors and youth who are not involved in policy debates. Facilitate constructive dialogue between Armenian CSOs and the government, where NGOs are given a space to participate in a policy dialogue. There should be joint ventures and initiatives that support the empowerment of the vulnerable segment of Armenian society.
- It is important to support the civil society for more involvement in developing peace dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

### Azerbaijan

- For promoting digital literacy, designing nationwide programmes to teach digital skills and AI literacy to all age groups, with a focus on inclusivity for marginalized communities is important.
- Subsidizing technology costs is essential, as providing affordable or subsidized devices and software to low-income families, schools, and community centers can help bridge the digital divide. Developing localized content tailored to the Azerbaijani language and cultural context will also increase engagement and ensure relevance.
- Public-private partnerships (PPP) can play a pivotal role by encouraging collaboration



between the government, private sector, and international organisations to fund and implement inclusive AI initiatives.

- Supportive policies and regulations must be established to promote open access to digital resources and enforce digital equity measures while incentivizing organisations to invest in inclusive AI applications. Community learning hubs equipped with AI tools and staffed with trainers should be set up in various regions, offering free or low-cost access to technology and training.
- It is important to design programmes that address the needs of women, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups to ensure no one is left behind.
- Promote greater international engagement with Azerbaijan’s civil society, particularly through EU platforms. This will help address the challenges posed by restrictive national policies and give space for dialogue on governance and reforms.
- Advocate for legal reforms that guarantee freedom of association, speech, and assembly, to foster a more open and accountable society. These reforms should include mechanisms for safeguarding CSOs and journalists from government repression.
- There is a need to encourage the civil society of Azerbaijan to be more involved in developing a peace dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in saving cultural heritage in and around Nagorno-Karabakh from destruction, and fighting a systematic, state-level policy of Armenophobia, historical revisionism, and hatred towards Armenians promoted by the Azerbaijani authorities, including dehumanization, the glorification of violence, and territorial claims against the Republic of Armenia.

## Belarus

- The EU should pay close attention and respond to requests for support from Belarusian CSOs and initiatives, especially those inside the country. The EU should continue conducting needs assessments and inclusive consultations with Belarusian organisations to determine the necessary support, involving activists and their organisations both inside Belarus and those operating within the country but associated with organisations abroad.
- Instead of focusing on a predominantly project-based funding approach, the EU should consider providing the option of institutional funding for Belarusian CSOs as a form of short or medium-term assistance in its support programmes.
- The EU should increase support for exiled Belarusian civil society, providing necessary resources and recognition. Prioritize facilitating the relocation of organisations and ensuring the continuation of their work in exile.
- The EU should take further steps to simplify the reporting requirements for the projects and activities they support inside Belarus (especially for the small grants) by streamlining demands and not requesting documents and proofs that can increase security risks. The EU should also exhibit greater flexibility in modifying projected results, as long as CSOs explain and prove why such modifications are needed.
- Promote stronger ties between Belarusian exiles and civil society groups in neighboring countries. Enhance people-to-people diplomacy and educational

exchanges, ensuring that those at risk in Belarus can continue to engage in democratic activities.

- Expand opportunities for digital literacy and language courses, particularly for exiled Belarusians, to ensure they can remain engaged with the global community and maintain connections with their homeland.

## Georgia

- The EU, a long-standing partner, should redirect priorities toward regional projects, intergenerational dialogue, and collaboration with local organisations, focusing on the most vulnerable groups to address sustainability challenges and foster inclusivity.
- To build long-term resilience, incorporating media literacy and tools to identify fake news into the formal education curriculum is vital for empowering youth.
- While VET colleges and short training courses create valuable opportunities, more resources and state involvement are needed to expand access, especially for older citizens who face digital literacy challenges. Georgia must continue to prioritize digital education to keep pace with global trends.
- Overlapping activities in the same regions highlights the need for better coordination. International donors can aid this effort, but grassroots organisations, familiar with local contexts, should take the lead. These groups may require support from more experienced, capital-based organisations, whose role should focus on facilitation rather than control.
- Strengthening grassroots initiatives and ensuring sustainable funding for regional organisations are critical steps for further progress.
- Establish dedicated media literacy programmes that integrate both formal and non-formal educational systems. This is particularly critical in countries like Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, where misinformation, especially during election periods, poses a significant challenge to democratic processes.
- Provide targeted support for fact-checking organisations and media outlets in post-Soviet countries and increase their capacity to reach rural and older populations who are more vulnerable to disinformation.
- Encourage the development of independent, self-sustaining media outlets in Ukraine and Georgia to counter the rise of government-controlled narratives and to ensure pluralism in the media.
- Support the inclusion of youth in decision-making processes related to EU integration and democratic reforms, offering them the necessary training and resources to participate actively.
- Prioritize digital skills development for all generations, including seniors, with specific attention to regions with limited access to technology, like the high mountains in Georgia. Build a robust digital infrastructure to ensure equitable access to digital platforms.
- Continue to support efforts to counter Russian propaganda and strengthen the

pro-European orientation of EaP countries. This can be achieved through media campaigns, public discussions, and collaboration with the EU's external action services.

## Moldova

- There is a need for initiatives that focus on the educational aspects of EU integration, such as the benefits of trade, governance reform, and democratic values.
- Promote the inclusion of EU integration topics in formal and non-formal education curricula, providing citizens with a deeper understanding of the long-term benefits of aligning with the EU, both economically and politically.
- Strengthen local governance structures and improve the capacity of local authorities to engage with civil society organisations. Decentralization can help promote democratic participation at the local level, particularly in rural areas where access to government services and information remains a challenge.
- Encourage the creation of local advisory boards that include CSOs, youth, and marginalized groups to ensure that local decisions align with both the needs of the community and the aspirations for EU integration.
- Develop targeted programmes that focus on marginalized groups such as Roma communities, refugees, and people with disabilities, addressing their unique challenges in accessing education and civic participation.
- Strengthen national strategies for digital transformation by expanding training programmes in schools, universities, and communities, focusing on AI literacy, online safety, and responsible digital citizenship.
- Encourage lifelong learning programmes that combine soft skills (e.g., critical thinking, civic engagement) with hard skills (e.g., coding, financial literacy). This will enable citizens to navigate both the digital economy and the political landscape.
- Provide targeted support for fact-checking organisations and media outlets in post-Soviet countries and increase their capacity to reach rural and older populations who are more vulnerable to disinformation.

## Ukraine

- Implement policies that ensure marginalized groups have access to the same educational and civic opportunities as the rest of the population, particularly in regions affected by economic or infrastructural disadvantages.
- Establish joint educational programmes for school and university students from different EaP countries to build mutual understanding and share experiences on European integration and democratic reforms.
- Strengthen national strategies for digital transformation by expanding training programmes in schools, universities, and communities, focusing on AI literacy, online safety, and responsible digital citizenship.
- Invest in youth leadership programmes that equip young people with the skills necessary to engage with both local and national authorities on key issues like

human rights, democracy, and European integration.

- Promote regional programmes that connect youth and seniors in collaborative settings, such as cultural events, workshops, and debates, where both generations can share experiences and discuss EU integration. Intergenerational exchanges will help bridge the gap between the younger, more pro-European generation and the older generation, who may hold more conservative views.
- Encourage the development of independent, self-sustaining media outlets in Ukraine and Georgia to counter the rise of government-controlled narratives and to ensure pluralism in the media.
- Ensure long-term, predictable funding for CSOs working on youth engagement, media literacy, and digital skills, as this would strengthen their institutional capacity and sustainability.
- Recommendations aimed at providing input for the post-2025 EaP priorities and the next EaP Summit
- Strengthening support for governance reforms, especially in judicial independence. Ensuring PPP while policy elaboration creates an enabling environment for inclusive policy formulation where the needs of the target group are considered.
- Increase investments in digital and green transition. Advancing digital literacy skills, encouraging innovation, and digital transformation.
- Heavily investing in intergenerational dialogue platforms that bridge the gaps between youth and seniors
- Enhance regional cooperation mechanisms to address shared challenges by bringing the EaP countries together, organizing joint ventures and initiatives that allow collaboration, and bringing real changes to communities.
- Tailor support for each country's unique circumstances taking into consideration their political, social, and economic situation.

# 03

## **Conclusions and References**

## Conclusion

Civil society serves as the cornerstone of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), playing a crucial role in driving change, enhancing transparency and accountability, and fostering democratic reforms. The progress made by Ukraine and Moldova, and to an extent in Georgia highlights the transformative impact of a strong civil society. To build on this momentum, it is essential to enhance the involvement of civil society in shaping and implementing national and regional policies.

The European Union should prioritize supporting reform-minded actors across all EaP countries who are committed to genuine change. Additionally, the EU must continue to create spaces for civil society to engage in the planning and execution of the EaP agenda. This includes offering feedback on initiatives that have been overlooked and facilitating tripartite dialogue between the EU, EaP governments, and civil society particularly in Belarus and Azerbaijan where civil society is discouraged from engaging in discussions. Greater civil society participation in policy development and regional dialogues, which have traditionally been government-focused, is vital for progress. Examples such as involving civil society in EaP summits and incorporating NGOs in action plan development can help achieve this. Another key strategy to elevate civil society's role in fostering regional cooperation, which can inspire citizens in partner countries to become more active in advocating for reforms. However, there remains a disconnect between the EU's theoretical support for civil society and the practical outcomes. While civil society involvement in reforms and action plans was meant to be a priority in the EaP framework, in practice, it has received limited support. This gap stems from a variety of factors which are explored in this study. It is important to recognize that civil society support must be tailored to the specific stages of democratization: pre-transition, transition, and consolidation. Ukraine and Georgia are still in the pre-transition phase, Moldova and Armenia are in transition, and Belarus and Azerbaijan remain under authoritarian regimes. In light of emerging security challenges spurred by the dramatic shifts in the foreign policy of the new U.S. administration, European democracies must reconcile their differences and cultivate greater unity to navigate this evolving geopolitical landscape effectively.

In conclusion, civil society is not only the backbone of the Eastern Partnership but also the key driver of reform, capable of influencing government policies and effecting change both externally and internally most notably in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova. Given its vital role, the EU must place a higher emphasis on supporting civil society within the EaP framework. There is a need for an exemplified effort to transform EaP countries into more resilient, innovative, change-focused countries, however, it is possible with a strong and growth-oriented government where citizens and protection of individual basic human rights carry the utmost importance.

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