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Enhancing social dialogue for the implementation of social justice and decent work policies across the Eastern Partnership countries

EaP CSF Working Group 5 Policy Paper

March 2025





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Title: Enhancing social dialogue for the implementation of social justice and decent work policies across the Eastern Partnership countries

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Acknowledgments: EaP CSF Working Group 5

Date of initial publication: March 2025

Pages: 28

Original language: English

Visuals: Unsplash

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Executive Summary

Social dialogue, as a cooperative framework encompassing negotiations, consultations, and information exchange between workers, employers, and governments on socioeconomic policy matters, serves as a fundamental mechanism for implementing social justice and decent work policies across the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. As these nations pursue deeper integration with the European Union, the strengthening of social dialogue mechanisms becomes increasingly crucial for achieving meaningful progress in social justice and labor standards.

This policy paper examines how social partners and civil society can play a more active and meaningful role in strengthening social dialogue across EaP countries. The research specifically explores the mechanisms through which civil society organizations can contribute to the formulation and implementation of social justice and decent work policies, drawing on comprehensive data gathered through structured consultations with stakeholders.

The current state of social dialogue across the EaP region reveals significant variations in effectiveness and implementation. While Moldova and Ukraine have made notable progress in establishing inclusive dialogue mechanisms, other countries face substantial challenges. Belarus and Azerbaijan maintain highly restrictive environments for social partners and civil society engagement, while Georgia's recent introduction of foreign influence agent laws signals concerning regression in civic space. The effectiveness of tripartite committees varies considerably, with many operating without sufficient authority or clear mandates for policy reforms.

The analysis leads to several critical recommendations for strengthening social dialogue mechanisms, including: enhancing the effectiveness of tripartite commissions through regular meetings and binding decision-making power, improving the legislative environment for civil society organizations and social partners, building sustainable capacity of stakeholder organizations, and strengthening regional cooperation frameworks.

In conclusion, while the EaP region faces significant challenges in implementing effective social dialogue, there are clear opportunities for improvement through targeted reforms, capacity building, and enhanced regional cooperation. The success of these efforts will depend largely on sustained political commitment, improved institutional frameworks, and strengthened stakeholder engagement mechanisms.

Key words: Eastern Partnership countries, social dialogue, civil society organizations, social partners, trade unions, employer organizations, labor policies, tripartite commissions, trade unions, institutional frameworks, civil society participation, policy implementation

Introduction

Social dialogue is a cornerstone of democratic governance and labor relations, providing a platform for structured communication among workers, employers, and governments. It serves to align diverse interests, improve labor policies, and foster inclusive economic growth. However, the effectiveness of social dialogue hinges on the strength of its institutional frameworks, the representativity of its participants, and the extent of its integration into broader societal structures.

The implementation of social justice and decent work policies across the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries represents an important direction. Since the establishment of the EaP initiative in 2009, social dialogue has emerged as a fundamental mechanism for promoting economic reforms, facilitating market transition, and improving living standards across the region. However, the effectiveness of this dialogue and the extent of civil society and social partners participation vary significantly among EaP countries.

Social dialogue, defined as a cooperative framework among social partners and state institutions, serves as a fundament of the European social model. This framework aims to balance the interests of different segments of society in social and economic matters while ensuring internal stability. As EaP countries pursue deeper integration with the European Union through Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs), the strengthening of social dialogue mechanisms becomes increasingly crucial for achieving meaningful progress in social justice and labor standards.

The role of civil society organisations (CSOs) alongside the worker's and employers' representatives in this context cannot be understated. CSOs represent diverse stakeholder interests and possess valuable insights into local social and economic conditions. However, their potential to contribute to policy formulation and implementation remains largely untapped across many EaP countries.

This policy paper examines how social partners and civil society can play a more active and meaningful role in strengthening social dialogue across Eastern Partnership countries. It specifically explores the mechanisms through which civil society organisations can contribute to the formulation and implementation of social justice and decent work policies. The analysis focuses on identifying concrete actions that can be taken to enhance participation of social partners and civil society in social dialogue processes, while considering the unique political, economic, and social contexts of different EaP countries.

By examining these questions, this paper aims to contribute to the broader discussion on economic integration and policy convergence within the Eastern Partnership framework. It seeks to provide practical recommendations for strengthening social dialogue mechanisms and enhancing civil society participation in policy-making processes, ultimately supporting the region's progress toward European integration and improved social standards.

01

Overview of the current state of play

I. Overview of the current state of play

1. Armenia

Armenia's social dialogue system has evolved significantly during the country's transition from centralized governance to a market-oriented economy, supported by Labor Code (amended 2021) and the Law on Trade Unions, with the Republican Tripartite Commission serving as the primary platform for national-level dialogue. The system received additional impetus through Armenia's commitments under the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the European Union, particularly through Chapter 15, which emphasizes cooperation on employment, social policy, and equal opportunities.

The institutional framework operates at multiple levels, encompassing organisational, state and sectoral level dialogue. At the organisational level, dialogue primarily occurs between trade unions and employers, while the state level features a tripartite structure including employers' unions, government representatives, and trade union confederations. The Confederation of Trade Unions of Armenia (CTUA) represents approximately 180,000 workers across 19 sectoral unions, though union density has declined to around 15% of the formal workforce. The Republican Union of Employers of Armenia (RUEA) coordinates employer positions but struggles to effectively represent small and medium enterprises. Armenia ratified ILO C 144 which is the main basic legal act on social dialogue among the Government, Trade Unions and Employers Unions.

The effectiveness of social dialogue varies considerably across sectors. The electricity and mining sectors demonstrate relative success, maintaining strong trade unions and effective collective agreements. However, other sectors face significant challenges. The state institution sector lacks clearly defined social partners, while the healthcare sector shows inconsistent progress in establishing bilateral or trilateral collective agreements. The education sector contends with weak trade unions and limited teacher engagement in labor rights advocacy. The agriculture sector faces particular difficulties due to its high proportion of self-employed workers and the absence of a dedicated ministry.

The high rate of informal employment, approximately 30% with agriculture workers, significantly impacts effective social dialogue implementation. Small and medium-sized enterprises often operate outside formal dialogue mechanisms, creating a representation gap. Additionally, the capacity of labor inspectorates remains insufficient for comprehensive monitoring of working conditions, further challenging the system's effectiveness.

There have been notable successes, particularly in influencing labor code amendments and health insurance reform. The tripartite commission has successfully incorporated trade union suggestions into legislation and advocated for balanced reforms in

compulsory health insurance. A significant development is anticipated in 2025 with the planned signing of a new tripartite agreement, which would mark a revival of formal social dialogue following a gap since 2023.

While Armenia maintains functional labor laws, their practical implementation remains problematic, complicated by low legal literacy in the post-Soviet context. Communication gaps between stakeholders and the general population during legislative and reform processes have hindered progress. This was particularly evident in the implementation of CEPA, where the absence of a clear communication strategy limited its effectiveness.

2. Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan's social dialogue tradition dates back to 1904, marked by the first collective agreement between oil workers and employers. This foundation evolved significantly following the country's independence and transition from the Soviet era. A key milestone was Azerbaijan's 1992 membership in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and subsequent ratification of critical conventions, including Convention No. 144 on Tripartite Consultations, demonstrating formal commitment to international labor standards.

The current framework is primarily governed by the Labor Code of 1999, developed through consultations among the government, the National Confederation of Entrepreneurs Organisations, and the Confederation of Trade Unions. The General Collective Agreement provides the foundation for tripartite cooperation, though implementation effectiveness varies substantially across sectors. Recent Labor Code amendments have strengthened formal consultation requirements, yet practical application remains inconsistent.

The Azerbaijan Trade Unions Confederation (ATUC) formally represents approximately 1.6 million workers. The trade union system faces fundamental challenges in genuine worker representation, with unions often functioning as extensions of management rather than independent advocacy bodies. A particularly problematic practice is the automatic enrollment of workers into unions without consent, coupled with mandatory salary deductions for union dues, even in major state-owned enterprises. The oil and gas sector, influenced by international partnerships since the 1990s, demonstrates more structured dialogue mechanisms.

The operating environment for civil society organisations has become increasingly restrictive, particularly following the 2013 NGO law and 2014 legislation on grants. These regulatory changes have led to a dramatic decline in independent civil society organisations that previously facilitated dialogue between government institutions and society. Government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) have filled this vacuum, often impeding genuine reform initiatives and complicating the legislative environment.

3. Belarus

The concept of social dialogue in Belarus is fraught with challenges stemming from political repression, restrictive legal frameworks, and a lack of political will. The National Council on Labor and Social Issues maintaining formal dialogue structures, but independent stakeholder participation faces severe limitations. State-controlled unions dominate formal mechanisms, while independent organisations operate under restrictive conditions.

The events following the 2020 presidential elections marked a significant decline in civil liberties, culminating in the dissolution of numerous independent trade unions and civil society organisations. The Law on Trade Unions and related regulations impose substantial barriers to registration and operation of independent labor organisations. The current regulations require unions to seek government approval for registration, a process that violates ILO Convention 87 on the right to freedom of association.

Multiple Belarusian trade union leaders remain imprisoned on charges of disrupting public order, facing lengthy sentences that international labor organisations have condemned as politically motivated repression of independent trade unions. Civil society organisations face similar constraints in their ability to engage in policy discussions. The lack of open channels for dialogue restricts CSOs' influence on policy decisions. Financial restrictions pose another significant barrier. A presidential decree on foreign aid requires all international funding to be registered with the Department of Humanitarian Assistance under the president's administration, severely limiting civil society organisations' ability to conduct educational and advocacy activities.

The Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FPB) remains the only labor organisation, though its independence from state influence is questioned by international observers. All independent unions and civil society groups were forcibly liquidated in 2022 and the remaining civil society groups operate under significant constraints, limiting their ability to effectively represent worker interests. Belarus's relationship with international labor organisations remains complex. The ILO has repeatedly raised concerns about violations of fundamental labor rights and restrictions on social dialogue. This has implications for the country's participation in regional labor initiatives. The ILO and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) have refused to recognize the dissolution of independent trade unions, maintaining their legitimacy on the global stage.

4. Georgia

Georgia has established formal structures for social dialogue, primarily through the Tripartite Commission for Social Partnership under the Prime Minister's Office. The framework involves three major social partners: the Georgian Trade Union Confederation (GTUC), Georgian Employers Association (GEA), and the Georgian Government (GoG). This tripartite dialogue was formally initiated in December 2008 through a memorandum signed by the social partners, followed by a legal act establishing the Tripartite Social

Dialogue Committee.

The institutional structure includes national and regional-level operations, supported by technical working groups focusing on specific labor market issues. The importance of social dialogue is recognized in several pieces of Georgian legislation, emphasizing its role in socio-economic development. The 2013 Labor Code amendments further strengthened these institutional mechanisms for stakeholder engagement.

However, the Commission's effectiveness has been limited by infrequent meetings, failing to meet its mandate for regular sessions under the Prime Minister's leadership during critical periods such as 2013-2016. To address these shortcomings, an Advisory Council was established to complement the Commission and facilitate more frequent consultations, though its impact has been limited.

The business sector's engagement remains limited, with few independent proposals emerging from this group. While legal frameworks allow any party to convene meetings outside regular schedules, this provision is primarily utilised by trade unions, with minimal engagement from business representatives.

Between 2018 and 2020, many labor reforms bypassed established social dialogue frameworks, with discussions primarily occurring within parliamentary processes. The 2018 occupational safety law exemplifies this pattern, enacted reactively following a tragic incident in Tkibuli rather than through proactive stakeholder engagement.

Georgian civil society organisations contribute significantly to social dialogue through research, advocacy, and monitoring activities. However, Foreign Influence Agent Law in Georgia represents a significant threat to democratic institutions and human rights by requiring organisations receiving foreign funding to register as "foreign agents," a designation that carries both practical burdens and stigmatizing implications. This legislation severely constrain civil society organisations, independent media outlets, and human rights defenders who rely on international support to conduct their essential work in strengthening democracy and protecting human rights. The law's broad scope and punitive measures, including heavy fines and potential criminal penalties, create a chilling effect on civic engagement and public discourse, effectively limiting citizens' access to diverse information sources and humanitarian assistance. This is creating additional challenges for social dialogue; Affecting the sustainability of social dialogue initiatives, which have traditionally relied on international support.

Social dialogue in Georgia remains weak according to the European Commission's 2024 assessment. While the country has established functioning tripartite dialogue at both national level and in one region, the report identifies significant gaps. Notably, collective bargaining shows no improvement, and social partners need enhanced support to build their capabilities.

5. Republic of Moldova

The country has established formal structures for social dialogue, primarily through the National Commission for Consultations and Collective Bargaining, which serves as a tripartite platform for discussions, consisting of equal representation, with six members each from trade unions, employers, and government, along with additional substitute members.

Moldova's social dialogue is supported by comprehensive legislation governing trade union and employer organisation activities, complemented by laws ensuring transparency in decision-making processes. The system is strengthened by government decisions mandating consultation platforms at various administrative levels to enhance civil society participation. The EU Association Agreement has further reinforced institutional frameworks and accountability mechanisms.

Recent reforms have improved coordination between national and local dialogue platforms, with the National Strategy for Employment and associated action plans demonstrating increased integration of social dialogue principles in policy formation. However, while the National Commission's recommendations can influence draft legislation, they remain non-binding, allowing government and parliamentary discretion in implementation. Regular monthly meetings of the National Commission demonstrate Moldova's commitment to social partnership, with recent achievements including a notable 25% increase in the minimum wage through negotiations.

Moldova's EU accession process serves as a significant driver for enhancing social dialogue mechanisms. The country's participation in EU-related platforms and working groups demonstrates commitment to alignment with European standards. The confederation's active involvement in working groups focused on labor relations, social dialogue, and worker mobility positions it as a key stakeholder in the integration process.

Despite established frameworks, collaboration between civil society and government remains inconsistent. CSOs report significant difficulties engaging key ministries, with attempts to establish contact often going unanswered. Only 23% of civil society organisations actively participate in consultation processes. According to a recent report by Promo-LEX, only 16% of draft laws submitted by deputies undergo public consultations. The EU's roadmap for engagement notes that Moldova's civil society environment remains characteristic of countries with unconsolidated democratic systems, showing weaknesses in enabling environment and effective public participation.

6. Ukraine

At the national level, social dialogue is governed by formal legislation and institutional structures, including the National Tripartite Social and Economic Council, which brings together representatives of employers, employees, and the government. The Law

on Social Dialogue and related regulations provide a comprehensive framework for stakeholder engagement, though implementation faces practical challenges.

An important barrier to effective social dialogue in Ukraine is the issue of representation. Trade unions and employer organisations face stringent requirements for proving their representativeness, which excludes many smaller, independent organisations from participating in formal discussions.

Employer organisations encounter similar difficulties. Many local-level associations, particularly those representing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), are not formally recognized as social partners under the law. These groups often resort to participating in public councils—a less formal and less influential avenue for dialogue—which limits their ability to address broader labor issues effectively.

From a regional perspective, particularly exemplified by the Kharkiv experience, social dialogue presents significant challenges where it frequently becomes absent in rural areas and districts. Employer organisations are virtually nonexistent at the grassroots level, while trade unions, primarily concentrated in sectors like healthcare and education, show limited engagement in dialogue processes. Local government representatives often lack understanding of social dialogue mechanisms and their proper implementation, creating a significant gap between formal requirements and practical execution.

The state of social dialogue in Ukraine is significantly impacted by the ongoing war, which has created both legal and practical restrictions on ability to negotiate effectively for workers' rights, as well as activities, such as strikes, rallies, and protests.

Despite the challenging environment, some positive developments have emerged. The union's cooperation with the National Agency for Rebuilding Ukraine represents a constructive example of engagement in social dialogue, particularly in addressing issues related to worker registration and social security coverage in the construction sector. Several innovative approaches and adaptations have emerged. Organisations have developed strategies to overcome institutional barriers, including building networks and partnerships across regions to amplify their voice and influence, utilizing parliamentary channels to advance their agenda when direct government engagement proves difficult, organizing roundtables and other forums to create alternative spaces for dialogue, and developing collaborative approaches with other civil society organisations to pool resources and expertise.

Ukraine's progress toward European Union integration has also created opportunities for more frequent discussions about necessary legal reforms and alignment with EU standards. The Eastern Partnership program, while primarily serving as a diplomatic tool, has facilitated deeper discussions regarding EU membership and association agreements.

II. Regional considerations

The social dialogue landscape in Eastern European countries is significantly influenced by their Soviet legacy, which continues to shape how social partners, states, and CSOs understand and engage in social dialogue. The study reveals several common characteristics:

1. Effectiveness of tripartite committees

While Tripartite Councils exist in these countries, they frequently operate without sufficient authority or clear mandates for policy reforms. Furthermore, issues with council composition and accessibility often restrict the full participation of relevant social partners. A fundamental challenge lies in the current dialogue process's informal and ad hoc nature. As interviewees observe, many interactions resemble “coffee breaks” rather than structured dialogue, lacking proper documentation and follow-up procedures. The timing of engagement presents another significant obstacle, with social partners often being involved too late in the policy-making process, which substantially limits their ability to influence outcomes meaningfully.

2. Governments' Role and Coordination Challenges

While the Ministry of Labor serves as the primary point of engagement in EaP countries, worker-related issues frequently intersect with multiple ministries, creating substantial coordination challenges. This complexity is further exacerbated by frequent turnover in government personnel, forcing trade unions to repeatedly build relationships and educate new decision-makers about their role and functions. Such institutional instability significantly hampers the establishment of sustainable social dialogue mechanisms. Also, the lack of the political will to include social partners into decision making process also is a core element in EaP countries and creates obstacles for the development of the social dialogue.

In recent years, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region has experienced a concerning pattern of increasing authoritarian control over civil society organizations (CSOs). Azerbaijan and Belarus have long maintained restrictive environments for CSOs through stringent registration requirements, financial constraints, and government surveillance. Georgia's recent introduction of foreign influence agent laws in 2023 marks a significant shift toward more restrictive oversight of civil society.

3. Trade unions independence and capacity

The independence of trade unions remains a significant concern in the current landscape. While formally independent, many unions struggle to maintain genuine autonomy from both state and employer influence, a situation that contradicts the International Labour Organization's fundamental definition of social dialogue requiring independent parties. This challenge is influenced by persistent Soviet legacy. Many still associate these organizations with Soviet-era practices of providing social benefits,

creating widespread misconceptions about their current role and functions in a modern democratic society.

Trade union fragmentation poses a major obstacle to effective dialogue. The movement's division significantly impairs their ability to present unified positions and reduces their collective negotiating power. This fragmentation frequently leads to delays in the policy-making process, ultimately causing governments to bypass meaningful consultation.

The capacity and representation of social partners present substantial issue to effective social dialogue. Many organizations lack the necessary resources base required for meaningful participation in policy discussions. This includes financial sustainability: many unions struggle with financial independence, largely due to structural issues where membership fees remain at the local level, preventing strategic resource allocation at the national level; As well, limited access to legal experts who can understand and contribute effectively to legislative discussions.

4. Common Characteristics of Social Issues

The Eastern Partnership countries face several interconnected social challenges in their labor markets. The informal economy remains significant across these nations, though its size varies, creating representation gaps for informal workers and affecting formal social dialogue mechanisms. This complexity is compounded by cross-border labor issues that require coordinated responses, particularly in sectors with high worker mobility such as construction, agriculture, and services, while the absence of regional mechanisms for coordinating social dialogue on migration-related labor issues remains a significant gap. Simultaneously, the growth of platform work and remote employment, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic's digital transformation of work practices, challenges traditional structures and requires social dialogue mechanisms to adapt while ensuring inclusive participation. These challenges are further intensified as traditional industries face restructuring and modernization demands, while emerging sectors like IT and digital services often lack established social dialogue mechanisms, creating a pressing need for adaptive approaches to ensure comprehensive stakeholder representation across all sectors.

02

**Review of the implementation of
the EaP priority,
post-2020 Policy considerations
and opportunities for improvement**

III. Review of the implementation of the EaP priority

The European Commission established a transformative policy framework for the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in March 2020, marking a significant strategic shift. This framework articulated five fundamental objectives: developing resilient, sustainable, and integrated economies; strengthening institutional accountability and rule of law; enhancing environmental and climate resilience; advancing digital transformation; and fostering fair and inclusive societies. The Council of the European Union's subsequent endorsement in May 2020 reinforced the strategic importance of these priorities and demonstrated the EU's commitment to shared democratic values and regional stability.

The policy implementation gained substantial momentum with the adoption of the Joint Staff Working Document in July 2021, titled "Recovery, Resilience and Reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities." Implementation efforts have yielded notable successes across multiple domains. Trade relations between the EU and EaP countries have strengthened considerably, particularly through the successful implementation of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. The region has also witnessed progress in institutional reinforcement and digital development, with new initiatives enhancing both economic modernization and public service delivery efficiency.

The implementation of reforms has been uneven across the region. Political instability in certain partner countries has impeded consistent reform implementation, while persistent economic disparities both within and between participating nations hamper unified regional development. Moreover, deeply rooted challenges such as systemic corruption and inadequate judicial frameworks continue to undermine public confidence and impede progress toward the framework's established objectives.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has served as a catalyst for deeper integration between certain EaP states and the EU, particularly in strategic areas. For Ukraine and Moldova, the prospect of EU membership has accelerated reforms and alignment with EU norms, while Armenia has maintained relative stability despite some reform fatigue. The granting of EU candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine in June 2022, followed by the European Commission's recommendation in November 2023 to open accession negotiations with both countries and grant candidate status to Georgia, has proven to be a powerful driver for Ukraine and Moldova for reform implementation, particularly in areas of governance, anti-corruption, and judicial independence.

Georgia has experienced considerable regression across multiple priority areas, particularly in democracy and good governance indicators, reflecting the country's political polarization. Azerbaijan continues to move toward stronger authoritarianism, while Belarus maintains its isolation from EaP objectives, particularly following its role as co-aggressor in Russia's war against Ukraine.

Meaningful civil society engagement remains crucial for effective implementation of reforms and sustainable democratic development in the region, particularly in the context of EU integration processes for candidate countries, thus has been an important

horizontal priority.

Civil society engagement in the EaP region shows significant variation between countries, particularly reflecting their different relationships with the EU and levels of democratic development. While Moldova and Ukraine have strengthened mechanisms for civil society engagement, other partner countries have shown varying degrees of restriction on civic space.

Moldova has emerged as a leader in civil society engagement, establishing comprehensive mechanisms for CSO participation in governance. The government introduced non-reimbursable financing mechanisms for CSO projects through Decision No. 656/2022, and created platforms for civic participation in parliamentary decision-making. A significant milestone was reached with the finalization of the Programme for Development of Civil Society Organisations for 2024-2027, and in May 2023, the re-launch of the Coordination Committee on Open Government marked an important step in promoting transparency and citizen engagement.

The situation in Ukraine demonstrates how civil society engagement can be maintained even under challenging circumstances. Despite martial law conditions, Ukrainian authorities have enacted measures to protect CSO operations. A survey conducted by Chatham House in 2024 revealed that nearly 80% of Ukrainian CSOs are already implementing recovery initiatives at both national and regional levels. This marks a significant increase from 2022, indicating a growing role for civil society in addressing wartime challenges.

Georgia's trajectory shows concerning regression in civil society engagement. The government's attempted introduction of the "foreign agents" law, which would have required NGOs receiving over 20% foreign funding to register as 'agents of foreign influence', represented a significant threat to civil society space. While this law was ultimately withdrawn following mass protests, it highlighted the growing tensions between authorities and civil society organizations.

In stark contrast, Belarus and Azerbaijan have seen systematic dismantling of independent civil society engagement. In Belarus, as of December 2024, monitoring by Lawtrend identified 1,186 non-governmental organizations undergoing forced liquidation proceedings. Additionally, 705 organizations, including public associations, foundations, institutions, and political parties, faced liquidation through decisions made by their authorized bodies or founders. Azerbaijan maintains a restrictive environment where GONGOs dominate, and independent CSOs face severe operational constraints. The legal framework established between 2013-2015 has made it virtually impossible for independent CSOs to register and receive funding.

IV. Policy considerations and opportunities for improvement: Lessons learnt and Challenges going forward

1. Legislation and Enabling environment for CSOs and social partners

The political environment significantly influences social dialogue effectiveness, with authoritarian tendencies in Belarus and Azerbaijan constraining dialogue through political pressures and restrictive legislation. Economic, political, and social differences among EaP countries necessitate tailored approaches, as demonstrated by the experiences of Ukraine and Moldova. The recent introduction of “foreign agent” laws in some countries has created additional complications for civil society organizations and trade unions, particularly regarding international funding and partnerships.

The reform efforts must focus on developing standardized stakeholder engagement procedures while actively dismantling legislative barriers that impede CSO participation. This requires systematic changes to current governmental procedures, including the revision of restrictive NGO laws, simplification of registration requirements, and removal of limitations on foreign funding.

2. Tripartite commissions

Tripartite commissions serve as the cornerstone of social dialogue across the Eastern Partnership region, functioning as primary forums for negotiating labor laws, minimum wage adjustments, and economic policies. The primary challenge facing tripartite commissions in EaP countries lies in their often limited authority and implementation capacity. Many commissions operate with minimal stakeholder engagement and lack clear mechanisms to transform their recommendations into actionable policies, effectively reducing them to procedural formalities rather than influential policy tools. Experience across the region demonstrates that successful commission operations require three key elements: well-defined institutional mandates, genuine independence of social partners from government influence, and binding authority for their recommendations.

Moving forward, strengthening these commissions will require addressing systemic issues of delayed communication and limited transparency, while establishing clear implementation pathways that ensure commission decisions carry meaningful weight in policy development. The effectiveness of these improvements ultimately hinges on sustained political commitment to empower these bodies as legitimate forums for social dialogue.

3. Capacity building and sustainability of social Partners and CSOs

The evolving landscape of work and social dialogue require targeted capacity-building interventions. A pressing concern is the digital infrastructure gap among stakeholder organizations, particularly evident in the urban-rural divide, which impacts their ability to participate effectively in dialogue processes. The emergence of platform employment and remote work arrangements further compounds these challenges, requiring innovative approaches to worker protection and representation. Thus, strategic investments in digital infrastructure and skills development must be prioritized, ensuring dialogue platforms effectively integrate both traditional and digital engagement methods. Additionally, focused leadership development programs are essential for cultivating the next generation of civil society leaders who can navigate these evolving challenges while maintaining effective social dialogue mechanisms in an increasingly digitalized environment.

Financial sustainability remains a critical foundation for effective social dialogue, requiring stakeholder organizations to develop diverse and stable funding sources beyond international donor support. Building credibility is paramount for social dialogue institutions as they work to overcome the legacy of Soviet-era perceptions that viewed social partners as extensions of state control rather than independent representatives.

4. Cooperation at regional level

International partnerships have proven instrumental in strengthening social dialogue mechanisms across the Eastern Partnership region, with EU engagement through Association Agreements. The implementation of these agreements, particularly in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, has created stronger incentives for enhancing social dialogue practices to align with EU standards. This momentum is supported by established cooperation channels through ILO offices and EU funding mechanisms.

Enhanced regional coordination must build upon existing international support structures while adapting successful European social dialogue models to local contexts. This coordinated approach should prioritize knowledge sharing and capacity building across borders.

V. Recommendations aimed at providing input for the post-2025 EaP priorities and in view of the next EaP Summit

Based on the comprehensive analysis of social dialogue implementation across Eastern Partnership countries, the following recommendations aim to strengthen future cooperation frameworks and enhance the effectiveness of engagement of social partners and CSOs in social dialogue mechanisms.

1. Enhancing effectiveness of Tripartite commissions

- While currently limited to minimal annual meetings, the commission must evolve into a dynamic platform that facilitates meaningful engagement between social partners. This evolution begins with the implementation of regular monthly meetings as originally mandated, supported by robust procedures for decision tracking and implementation.
- The government must establish transparent processes and ensure timely information sharing, thereby fostering trust and enabling productive participation from all stakeholders.
- Clear guidelines for the council's composition and operation would improve transparency and accountability.
- Elevating its status from a purely consultative body to a more decisive force in labor policy-making necessitates making its recommendations either binding or considerably more influential. This institutional enhancement should be accompanied by clear guidelines governing the council's composition and operations, promoting transparency and accountability throughout its functions.
- To ensure comprehensive representation and effective dialogue, the commission should establish specialized working groups focused on critical issues. These groups would develop transparent methodologies and create mechanisms for regular policy adjustments based on economic indicators and stakeholder input.
- Establishing monitoring mechanisms to ensure adherence to principles. Regular evaluation of dialogue quality and effectiveness helps maintain high standards and identifies areas needing improvement.

2. Improve Legislative and enabling environment for CSOs and Social Partners

- International pressure must be maintained through organizations like the ILO and European Union to advocate for the restoration of independent trade unions and civil society organizations. This includes continuing to reject the legitimacy of their forced dissolution.
- The government should establish mandatory early-stage consultation requirements that begin with sharing policy concept notes with registered CSOs and social partners before specific measures are developed. Each ministry must maintain an updated registry of relevant CSOs in their domain and systematically notify them of

upcoming consultations.

- Consultation timeframes should be structured according to policy complexity, with extended periods allocated for comprehensive reforms and appropriate shorter periods for time-sensitive issues. A comprehensive tracking system should be implemented to monitor all stakeholder submissions from initial receipt through final policy decisions, with government bodies required to provide written responses explaining how input was incorporated or why it was not included.
- Ministries should designate dedicated staff responsible for managing civil society engagement and documentation. The consultation process should accommodate multiple input channels, including digital platforms, formal written submissions, and structured dialogue sessions, ensuring accessibility for all stakeholders.
- The legal criteria for representativeness should be revised to include smaller trade unions and employer organizations. Specific mechanisms should be created to enable participation from smaller organizations and non-representative bodies in dialogue processes, including dedicated platforms for small and medium-sized businesses to contribute their perspectives.

3. Increase capacity and sustainability of social Partners and CSOs

- Financial sustainability of civil society organizations, and social partners, requires strategic management of membership fees to reduce external funding dependence. Civil society organizations need to transition towards broader movement-based approaches, focusing on building stronger connections with their members rather than relying primarily on external funding. This shift is particularly important given the changing funding landscape and increasing restrictions on international support.
- Building the capacity of social partners, investing in developing expertise within organizations, supporting the formation of competent technical teams, and providing resources for research and policy analysis. Targeted capacity-building programs that enhance smaller organizations' capabilities in labor law, negotiation, and proposal development. International organizations, including the International Labour Organization, can provide essential support through technical expertise and resources for these capacity-building initiatives.
- Building future leadership capacity through targeted programs and mentorship opportunities can help ensure the long-term viability of social dialogue mechanisms. Educational events and networking opportunities enable participants to share experiences and collectively address workplace challenges.
- CSOs and social partners should implement a multi-channel engagement strategy that maintains consistent communication with institutions through both formal and informal networks. This approach requires systematic documentation of all engagement efforts and persistent follow-through, even when facing institutional resistance. Organizations must develop adaptive strategies that respond effectively to changing political and institutional environments while maintaining focus on their core objectives.
- To enhance their credibility and impact, civil society organizations should strengthen their evidence-based advocacy through relying on research and data collection.

- The coordination between national and local dialogue initiatives should be formalized through regular meetings, standardized reporting formats, and digital platforms enabling real-time information sharing. Each governance level should designate liaison officers to ensure consistent communication flow and proper activity coordination.
- Support mechanisms such as legal resource centers should be established to provide expertise and facilitate more effective dialogue. These centers could serve as platforms for bringing together fragmented civil society actors and enhancing their capacity for strategic engagement.

4. Enhance regional cooperation and experience sharing

- International coordination should be strengthened through the establishment of regular coordination meetings with standardized reporting formats. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and International Labour Organization (ILO) should be engaged to provide technical expertise and ensure alignment with international labor standards.
- Strengthening regional coordination mechanisms for knowledge sharing, joint problem-solving and shared learning opportunities. EaP Civil Society Forum can act as regional social dialogue observatory to monitor developments, identify best practices, and facilitate cross-border cooperation, serving as a knowledge hub and provide analytical support for policy development.
- The development of regional cooperation networks should prioritize building lasting institutional relationships that can support continued dialogue improvement beyond specific project timeframes. This includes establishing permanent channels for communication and collaboration among social partners across borders, supported by regular regional forums and joint capacity-building initiatives.
- The post-2025 framework should prioritize the development of more effective monitoring and evaluation systems for social dialogue. This includes establishing standardized indicators for measuring dialogue outcomes and impact, supported by regular assessment mechanisms.

03

Conclusion and References

VI. Conclusion

The analysis of social dialogue mechanisms across Eastern Partnership countries reveals both significant challenges and promising opportunities. While formal dialogue structures exist throughout the region, their effectiveness varies substantially, influenced by political contexts, institutional capacities, and historical legacies.

The research demonstrates that successful social dialogue requires genuine commitment from all parties, adequate resources, and enabling institutional frameworks. The experiences of Moldova and Ukraine showcase how alignment with EU standards can drive positive reforms, while situations in Belarus and Azerbaijan illustrate how restrictive environments can fundamentally undermine dialogue mechanisms.

When properly empowered and resourced CSOs serve as vital bridges between government institutions and society, contributing valuable expertise to social policy discussions. However, their effectiveness is often constrained by legislative barriers, limited access to decision-making processes, and sustainability challenges.

Looking forward, the success of social dialogue in the Eastern Partnership region will depend on several key factors: the political will to implement meaningful reforms, the capacity of social partners to engage effectively, and the ability to adapt dialogue mechanisms to emerging workplace challenges. The recommendations presented in this paper provide a roadmap for addressing these requirements through systematic improvements to institutional frameworks, enhanced stakeholder capacity, and strengthened regional cooperation.

As the Eastern Partnership initiative moves beyond 2025, strengthening social dialogue remains crucial for social stability, economic development, and democratic governance—requiring sustained commitment from national governments, support from international partners, and active engagement from all stakeholders.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Working Group 5 of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

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