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Advancing democratisation in the Eastern Partnership countries: the role of civil society in national reforms, and European integration

EaP CSF Working Group 1 Policy Paper

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Executive Summary

Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine has reshaped both the neighbourhood and the European Union (EU). It has led to a new regional order, in which the EU is redefining itself as a security and geopolitical actor. The new US administration is challenging the former rules-based order and raising questions about the Western alliance and the US' role as a security guarantor in Europe. There is a new multipolar order, and Trump is advocating for a purely transactional-based world order. This new reality, coupled with the halt of US support—both military aid to Ukraine and development assistance through USAID—empowers authoritarian regimes and signals a return to power politics.

All of this will have implications for the EU, its neighbourhood, and its role as a global and regional actor. The EU is now in a phase of transition, redefining its role, including as an actor in the Eastern Neighbourhood, which is going through turbulent times. Russia has always been present, but China, Turkey, and Iran are also playing an increasing role. The EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy is in flux. Since the launch of the post-2020 EaP agenda, the region has undergone profound transformations, shaped by geopolitical shifts, internal political crises, and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine—which has arguably led to a multi-tiered EaP. The EU's engagement has evolved in response; balancing support for democratic reforms with the realities of political instability, economic hardship, and growing security threats. However, implementation gaps remain, and the EaP's relevance in its current form is increasingly being questioned.

Across the region, democratic trajectories have diverged sharply. Ukraine and Moldova, now EU candidate countries, have accelerated reforms despite external and internal pressures, while Georgia's political autocratisation not only threatens its European aspirations, but its existence as a democratic country¹. Armenia has distanced itself from Russia and has pursued stronger relations with the EU, including aspirations for EU accession². However, domestic uncertainty, coupled with the security and geopolitical situation, complicates the reform process. Following its victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Russia's weakened presence in the region, Azerbaijan continues to consolidate its power as an authoritarian state, leveraging its energy supplies for strategic influence. Meanwhile, Belarus has deepened its ties with Russia, with ongoing repressions and civil society operating largely in exile.

Civil society remains crucial for pushing democratic reforms, ensuring accountability, and sustaining public engagement in European integration. However, shrinking civic spaces, growing state repression against activists, media and civil society, and the absence of structured participation mechanisms undermine its effectiveness. The halt of the US funding following Trump's appointment is further impacting civil society's capacity to operate and remain relevant.

1 GIP, "Grappling With Autocratization: Is a New Form of Societal Accountability Emerging in Georgia?" GIP (blog), January 17, 2025, see [here](#).

2 "Armenia Floats EU Referendum amid Split with Russia," POLITICO, January 9, 2025, see [here](#).

While the EU's current support structures are valuable, they need revisions to provide more direct, flexible, and politically responsive assistance. Key lessons from recent years highlight the need for a more differentiated and strategic EU approach. Reform conditionality has proven effective in Moldova and Ukraine but remains difficult to enforce where political will is lacking. The EU's credibility in promoting democracy is undermined when it fails to respond decisively to democratic erosion or to play a robust role in conflict resolution—as evidenced by Azerbaijan's forceful takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh, which displaced over 120,000 people, and Georgia's rigged elections accompanied by violence against demonstrators. The EaP, in its current form, fails to address the growing divergence between reform-oriented and authoritarian-leaning states, as well as the distinct paths and interests that each country pursues. This calls for a restructured framework that aligns more closely with the European trajectories of individual countries, balancing pragmatic and transactional engagement with normative commitments.

The EaP framework remains valuable for its civil society component and the absence of alternative regional policies. However, to retain its relevance, it must evolve. A renewed EaP 2.0 should incorporate a security dimension, deeper economic and connectivity focuses, and enhanced capacity to address hybrid threats, including during elections. In this context, the EaP could serve as a comprehensive umbrella policy. Furthermore, a revitalised EaP could create bridges between candidate countries in the Eastern neighbourhood and those in the Western Balkans, while fostering civil society links with Central Asia and Turkey. To achieve these far-reaching goals, civil society involvement should be more formal where possible, and supported by increased core funding. A robust and meaningful EaP 2.0 also requires the EU to define its engagement with backsliding states, utilising targeted sanctions, enhanced monitoring, and alternative partnership models to maintain influence without legitimising authoritarian regimes. In case of more transactional engagements, this should be acknowledged and some conditionality put in place in order for the EU to maintain its credibility as a normative actor.

The future of the EaP hinges on the EU's ability to move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach, adapting its policy to reflect the region's evolving geopolitical and domestic realities. A more assertive, flexible, and security-conscious strategy is essential to ensuring that democratic momentum in some states is not undermined by instability and external pressures in others.

This paper examines the main challenges faced by civil society in effectively participating in decision-making processes for national reforms aimed at democratisation in the Eastern Partnership countries. It also analyses best practices that could be employed to strengthen the role of civil society in promoting democratic transformation and rule of law reforms across all EaP countries.

Introduction

Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally challenged the EU's role as a normative actor in the neighbourhood and has elevated security to a key priority in the region.

In this evolving and uncertain context, the EaP has become a policy in transition, as countries in the region pursue increasingly divergent trajectories. This situation necessitates a rethinking of the future of EU policies in the region, including a thorough reassessment of the role of civil society. The 'reinvigoration' of the EaP has been announced as one of the priorities of the Polish Presidency of the Council of the EU, which takes place in the first half of 2025. This will be linked to Warsaw hosting the EaP Business Forum on April 16, 2025³, yet no EaP Summit is envisaged under the Polish Presidency.

In response to geopolitical developments, Ukraine and Moldova were granted EU candidate status and subsequently invited to open accession talks, with the screening process currently underway. Both countries aim to open two negotiation chapters during the Polish Presidency⁴. In Ukraine and Moldova, civil society has played a pivotal role in driving national reforms, acting both as an advocate and a watchdog in collaboration with pro-reform governments, while also providing critical expertise for the EU accession process. Georgia, which also received candidate status, halted its EU accession as the government continues its authoritarian agenda. Ongoing mass demonstrations have erupted in response to the Georgian Dream's victory in rigged elections, in November 2024, alongside the introduction of the controversial Foreign Agent Law and anti-LGBTQI legislation and Georgia's Prime Minister's statement on suspending the accession talks with the EU until 2028. The ruling party is pursuing a policy to fully control the country, yet civil society continues to demonstrate remarkable resilience.

In Armenia, the situation is defined by a delicate balance between security concerns and deepening cooperation with the EU. The country's reform and democratisation efforts remain fragile, hampered by both the geopolitical environment and limited administrative capacity. Prime Minister Pashinyan and his party, Civil Contract, have begun preparations for the elections, with their pro-EU rhetoric also serving an electoral purpose—positioning the EU direction as a key part of their campaign. Tensions with Azerbaijan, particularly over Baku's ambitions to establish the so-called Zangezur corridor, add to Armenia's insecurity. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan continues to consolidate authoritarian rule, persecute civil society actors, and 'greenwash' its international image—most notably through its hosting of COP29 in November 2024—highlighting the regime's impunity.

3 "Poland's Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2025: Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Priorities and Activities - Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland - Gov.Pl Website," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, accessed February 1, 2025, see [here](#).

4 "European Commission Submits First Screening Report to European Council as Part of Ukraine's Accession Negotiations," European Pravda, accessed February 1, 2025, see [here](#).

Belarus' civil society, operating largely in exile, remains marginalised. While some activists within the country engage in social and environmental issues, their influence is minimal. The sham elections of January 2025 further entrenched Lukashenka's rule, and EU support within Belarus remains limited amidst the regime's ongoing violent repression.

Methodology

This paper aims to analyse the role of civil society in promoting democratisation and rule of law reforms within the EaP countries. It focuses on identifying the challenges faced by civil society in participating in decision-making processes and explores best practices to strengthen their influence. The paper includes all six EaP countries—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—while also addressing regional dynamics and shared challenges.

Research Design

The paper includes qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a robust understanding of civil society's role and challenges across the EaP region. It relies on primary data collected through semi-structured interviews and a survey, complemented by data analysis from reports, EU documents, and existing literature on the EaP, including the EaP Index 2023.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection included 12 semi-structured interviews with representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) from each EaP country. The interviews were designed to explore the following key areas:

- Challenges faced by civil society in the respective countries,
- Civil society's role in the justice sector and anti-corruption reforms,
- Expectations of civil society regarding EU policies,
- Opportunities for collaboration and regional exchange among civil society organisations across the EaP.

Survey

A survey was distributed to over 200 civil society organisations, and members of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, across the six EaP to collect insights on the topic explored in this paper, focusing on the same thematic areas addressed in the interviews. Despite the outreach and a prolonged deadline, the participation rate was low, with only 29 respondents. A low response rate indicates potential survey fatigue or limited organisational capacity.

Limitations

The small sample size of 12 interviews and the low survey response rate (29 out of more than 200 organisations) limits the generalisability of the findings. Moreover, the study relies on self-reported data from civil society actors, which may reflect personal biases or organisational perspectives. To address the limitations, the analysis was supported by secondary data from credible sources and also draws from the EaP Index 2023.

The survey and interviews were conducted at the end of 2024, and the paper was written in January 2025. However, since the paper was completed and the new Trump 2.0 presidency began, the geopolitical landscape has changed significantly. At the time of writing, the situation regarding Russia's war against Ukraine, the US's renewed relations with Russia, and the push to bring Ukraine into negotiations under conditions favourable to Russia remain a moving target.

01

**Overview of the current state
of play in each of the EaP
countries**

Overview of the current state of play in each of the EaP countries

Armenia

Political context and domestic developments

Security has been high on Armenia's agenda. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 and the Azerbaijani military takeover of the region in September 2023, followed by the mass exodus of Karabakh Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, had a strong impact on the country's security agenda and domestic situation. The influx of over 120,000 refugees has influenced the domestic landscape and required government support for housing and integration.

Armenia's relations with Russia have changed; Russia is no longer regarded as a trusted partner, yet it remains the main economic actor due to trade, remittances and energy dependency. On the other hand, relations between Armenia and the EU have deepened, particularly due to Russia's failure to provide adequate security support during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. While Armenia signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU in 2017, its implementation has gained traction only in recent years following a shift in Armenia's foreign policy priorities.

The EU has become a more active partner, offering financial aid and technical assistance, notably through the deployment of its civilian monitoring mission to Armenia (EUMA)⁵ and the launch of visa liberalisation negotiations⁶. Recently, the Armenian parliament debated a bill on EU Accession⁷, yet there is also an understanding both at in the Armenian political elites and the EU that Armenian accession to the EU in the near future is not currently on the table.

Some of the statements and EU-related agenda promoted by Prime Minister Pashinyan and his party can also be seen in light of the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2026, as he is campaigning with the pro-EU agenda and reaching out to people via social media channels and establishing himself as a social media influencer.

Armenia remains cautious, balancing its European aspirations with its reliance on Russian energy, businesses, infrastructure investment and trade. Russia maintains links with Armenia's parliamentary opposition and support for several media outlets. A key question is whether the EU's support can mitigate Armenia's dependence on Moscow, particularly in light of growing domestic scepticism about Russia's reliability, and whether Armenia can successfully diversify its economy from Russia.

Reform process

5 "EU Mission in Armenia | EEAS," accessed January 30, 2025, see [here](#).

6 "EU and Armenia Launch Visa Liberalisation Dialogue," Text, European Commission - European Commission, accessed January 28, 2025, see [here](#).

7 "Parliament Debates EU Bill," Armenpress, February 11, 2025, see [here](#).

Although the Armenian government remains committed to democracy, it struggles to implement sustainable reforms and has limited capacity to address cyber-attacks, illicit finance, and disinformation. Russia is also able to blackmail Armenia economically and could play a role in influencing Armenian parliamentary elections in 2026.

Institutional, and particularly judicial reform remains a key challenge and priority on Armenia's domestic agenda. The reforms have focused on improving judicial independence, combating corruption, and enhancing access to justice and some progress has been achieved⁸. However, many challenges remain, including in the management of the court system, the independence and accountability in the justice sector, insufficient institutional capacities and inadequate state funding⁹. There is limited capacity for monitoring the reform process itself and administrative capacity is low.

Moreover, the socio-economic situation remains a priority, and it does not seem that the current government has addressed these issues.

Role of civil society

Armenia's democratic progress and institutional resilience remain fragile. In recent years, there has been a process of democratisation, including freer elections and increased civic participation under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government. However, challenges such as media polarisation, disinformation, and political polarisation threaten this progress. This poses the risk that democracy or EU integration initiatives are perceived as politically biased, potentially undermining civil society's role in the reforms. During interviews, civil society representatives expressed that the consultation process is often pro forma, and more capacity is needed to follow up on civil society recommendations and ensure robust engagement.

Many civil society organisations in Armenia operate with a fragmented understanding of political and geopolitical dynamics, which weakens their ability to engage in effective advocacy. Failure to grasp the full scope of foreign influence, manipulation, and interference significantly increases their vulnerability. Civil society actors lack resources, but also tools to critically assess these threats. Some civil society organisations operate without a clear understanding of how external and internal forces manipulate democratic discourse, and they risk legitimising narratives that weaken institutions, deepen societal divides, and erode public trust. The halt of USAID funding will have major implications.

Conclusion

Armenia's geopolitical shift towards the EU remains a balancing act. On one hand, the country must manage its domestic and foreign policy challenges while pursuing reforms; on the other hand, the EU must remain a credible actor for Armenia. Among

⁸ "JOINT STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Partnership Implementation Report on Armenia," accessed February 1, 2025, see [here](#).

⁹ "JOINT STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Partnership Implementation Report on Armenia."

the EaP countries, Armenia is one where civil society, and the government could build on the EaP framework to further advance cooperation with the EU.

Azerbaijan

Political context and domestic developments

Azerbaijan's political and economic trajectory in the past years is defined by its assertive foreign policy, resource-driven economic growth, and crackdowns on democratic and human rights. The country's growing geopolitical ambitions, backed by its energy resources and strategic partnerships, as well as hosting COP 29 last year and using it for greenwashing purposes, contrasts sharply with persistent concerns over authoritarian governance, human rights abuses, imprisonment of activists and limited civic freedoms.

Azerbaijan's strategic importance as a key energy supplier to the EU has grown significantly, particularly amid Europe's efforts to diversify away from Russian energy sources. The Southern Gas Corridor, critical for delivering Azerbaijani gas to European markets, has cemented the country's role as a pivotal energy partner. The EU-Azerbaijan Memorandum of Understanding on energy cooperation, signed in 2022, continues to underpin this relationship. Azerbaijan currently supplies 7% of EU's gas¹⁰.

However, this reliance on energy has created a paradox for the EU. While Azerbaijan is a critical partner for energy security, its poor human rights record and undemocratic governance clash with the EU's stated values. The European Parliament's October 2024 resolution highlighted these contradictions, calling for greater scrutiny of Azerbaijan's domestic policies, especially concerning the suppression of civil society and media freedoms¹¹. Yet, the cooperation continues and Azerbaijan's strong advocacy efforts in the EU countries have further supported its efforts to pursue purely transactional relations with the EU.

Azerbaijan has leveraged its military victory in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and with the 2023 forceful takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh to assert dominance in the South Caucasus. The country's increasingly assertive policies and discourse towards Armenia in the past years, including heightened military presence near contested borders, reflect a desire to solidify gains and push for the so-called Zangezur Corridor, while avoiding meaningful concessions in peace negotiations. This approach has strained EU-led mediation efforts, exposing the limits of Brussels' influence in the region and negotiations have moved to a one-on-one format.

The actions of the US in the region and to Russia's war against Ukraine, can further strengthen Azerbaijan's transactional rhetoric and reinforce Azerbaijan's ambitions.

10 See [Energy.Ec.Europa.EU](#), accessed January 30, 2025 and [here](#).

11 "JOINT MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION on the Situation in Azerbaijan, Violation of Human Rights and International Law and Relations with Armenia | RC-B10-0133/2024 | European Parliament," accessed January 30, 2025, see [here](#).

Domestic challenges and civil society

Azerbaijan's internal political landscape remains heavily centralised under President Ilham Aliyev's administration. Systemic challenges persist, including repressions and lack of freedoms. There is little evidence of substantive change in terms of reforms and issues related to democracy.

The suppression of civil society remains a hallmark of Azerbaijan's governance. Restrictions on NGOs, media outlets, and political opposition have intensified¹². The government has targeted environmental activists and journalists reporting on ecological issues related to the energy sector.

Additionally, despite economic growth, social inequality and regional disparities persist, with rural areas often excluded from the benefits of national development projects.

Reform process and relations with the EU

The EU's engagement with Azerbaijan is driven by pragmatism and more transactional relations, particularly regarding energy security and regional stability, as well as bilateral relations between some Member States and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's actions had impunity, further solidifying the country as a middle power in the region – both due to its energy supplier role and lack of unity among the EU Member States. However, this pragmatic approach undermines the EU's credibility. Efforts to hold Azerbaijan accountable for human rights violations have often been secondary to the strategic need for energy cooperation, creating a credibility gap in the EU's foreign policy.

The EU has attempted to mitigate this by coupling energy agreements with discussions on reforms. For example, there were tentative to negotiate a more comprehensive agreement, with governance and transparency clauses¹³. However, Baku resisted these efforts, leveraging its energy dominance as a shield against external pressure. The lack of agreement among Member States and Azerbaijan's increased advocacy in the EU undermines EU efforts to meaningfully address the situation. The EU could introduce stricter conditions in exchange for energy cooperation, as well as prioritise funding for independent media and civil society organisations to counter state suppression.

Conclusions

Azerbaijan's strategic importance to the EU is undeniable, but its authoritarian governance and resistance to reform present significant obstacles to deepening the partnership. The EU must carefully balance its energy security needs with its commitment to democratic principles.

12 "Civil Society Demands Attention to Human Rights and Climate Justice Ahead of COP29 in Azerbaijan | Heinrich Böll Stiftung," accessed January 30, 2025, see [here](#).

13 "Azerbaijan," Consilium, accessed February 1, 2025, see [here](#).

Belarus

The year 2025 started for Belarus with Aliaksandr Lukashenka declaring himself a winner in another sham election, therefore further extending its 31-year rule¹⁴. The elections were preceded by repression and further crackdowns against activists. Since the 2020 repressions, most civil society and activists have left the country, and those inside the country operate in a restrictive environment being able to work on social and environmental issues, as long as they are not political.

Domestic and political developments

Lukashenka's reliance on Russian support further isolates Belarus from the West, and Belarus is perceived as a Russian ally. Following Belarus' involvement in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU imposed several waves of sanctions targeting key sectors such as potash exports, a critical source of revenue for the regime. While these measures have strained Belarus' economy, they have not prompted any meaningful concessions from the government.

Belarus' deepening economic dependency on Russia has further constrained its policy options. Belarus is appealing to Moscow's financial assistance to prevent economic collapse, but it comes with significant strings attached¹⁵. Belarus has ceded control over critical industries, such as energy and defence, to Russian firms, raising concerns about the erosion of its sovereignty.

In February 2024, Belarus conducted parliamentary and local elections. They took place in an environment of repressions, dismantling of political parties and controlled by security forces, preventing any unrest¹⁶. On 26 January 2025, Presidential elections took place, with Lukashenka 'winning' another term. They were declared as not meeting 'the minimum international standards for democratic elections and lack any democratic credibility', leading to non-recognition of legitimacy of Aliaksandr Lukashenka as president by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)¹⁷ yet there was no joint statement from the EU due to Hungary blocking it¹⁸.

Role of civil society

Despite the hostile environment, Belarusian civil society, most of it now in exile, has shown resilience. Exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has played a

14 Mark Trevelyan and Mark Trevelyan, "Putin Ally Lukashenko Declared Winner of Belarus Vote That West Calls a Charade," Reuters, January 27, 2025, sec. Europe, see [here](#).

15 "Belarus Set to Borrow 1.5 Bln Rubles from Russia in 2024-2025 for Import Substitution Projects - Finance Ministry," accessed February 1, 2025, see [here](#).

16 "Voting with No Alternative. Parliamentary and Local 'Elections' in Belarus," OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, February 27, 2024, see [here](#).

17 "No Grounds for Recognising the Legitimacy of Lukashenka as President of Belarus' Says Assembly," Portal, accessed February 2, 2025, see [here](#).

18 "Hungary Blocks Joint EU Statement On Presidential Elections In Belarus -- Sources," accessed February 2, 2025, see [here](#).

pivotal role in coordinating international advocacy and maintaining the momentum of the democratic movement. Belarusian NGOs and activists have secured €30 million in EU funding to support initiatives ranging from digital education to documenting human rights abuses¹⁹.

The situation inside the country remains dire for activists²⁰. There is a consistent use of torture, forced confessions, and systemic judicial bias in politically charged cases²¹. In addition, it is extremely difficult for local organisations to receive external aid, and this further endangers them. Most grassroots organisations are focused on social and environmental issues.

EU Policy and the Eastern Partnership

The EU's approach to Belarus has shifted from engagement to isolation since the 2020 crackdown. Belarus is effectively suspended from most EaP initiatives, with EU efforts focused on supporting civil society and increasing sanctions pressure. EU leaders held multiple high-profile meetings with Tsikhanouskaya, signalling continued support for democratic forces.

The EU expanded its sanctions list to include over 287 individuals, and 39 entities tied to the regime, alongside restrictions on Belarusian steel, wood, and potash exports²². As noted, the EU allocated significant funding for Belarusian civil society organisations, particularly those supporting political prisoners and independent media.

Conclusions

As long as Russia's war against Ukraine is going on and Belarus is an ally, it is difficult to expect a change of course. Moreover, while there are contacts between civil society in exile and the one in Belarus, supporting initiatives in the country is increasingly difficult. Yet, this is also the most useful tool to maintain relations with the Belarus people.

Georgia

Domestic and political developments

The year 2024 was crucial for Georgian democracy, deeply affecting its relations with the EU and domestic politics. Before the elections, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party adopted the controversial Foreign Agent Law, and anti-LGBTI law, which triggered mass protests. In a decisive vote, GD allegedly won elections and secured a majority,

¹⁹ "Commission to Provide €30 Million to Support Civil Society and Education Opportunities for the People of Belarus - European Commission," accessed February 1, 2025, see [here](#).

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Belarus: Events of 2023," in World Report 2024, 2024, see [here](#).

²¹ Human Rights Watch.

²² "Belarus: EU Lists 26 Individuals and 2 Entities in View of the Situation in the Country," Consilium, accessed February 1, 2025, see [here](#).

although there are widespread allegations and proofs of electoral fraud, combined with media censorship, and voter intimidation. Moreover, GD halted Georgia's EU Accession until the end of 2028²³. The ongoing increase of authoritarian measures has led to ongoing demonstrations across the country.

GD's victory is widely perceived as illegitimate by the opposition, civil society groups, and international observers. Protests, led by a coalition of opposition parties and grassroots movements, are demanding electoral reform, the release of political prisoners, and the resignation of key GD leaders—yet GD is holding on to power and tightening its grip.

The current situation reflects deeper dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in Georgia, characterised by the country's authoritarian drift and a power grab by oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. In recent years, Georgia has experienced a continued erosion of independent institutions, including a judiciary perceived as politically controlled, high-level corruption and the systematic repression of independent media outlets. GD has instrumentalised Russia's war against Ukraine by promoting the "Global War Party" narrative, fuelled by government-led disinformation campaigns portraying the EU as a pro-war force.

Additionally, the Georgian opposition has failed to present a platform capable of offering a viable alternative to GD and appealing to its voters. Both the opposition and civil society lack resources, and there is growing disappointment in the muted response from the US and the EU. Meanwhile, GD has shifted tactics—rather than resorting to overt violence, it has escalated the persecution of activists, including academia to further discourage protests.

The ongoing demonstrations have seen broader participation across socio-economic divides and a focus on systemic reforms rather than single-issue grievances. Yet, GD has intensified its crackdown on demonstrators, and after months of protests and worsening conditions, the EU has yet to impose sanctions or take strong action against the GD regime.

Democratic backsliding

Power has become deeply concentrated around GD and informal networks associated with oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Georgia's judiciary is seen as an extension of the ruling party, compromising its independence. Media freedoms have deteriorated significantly, with government-backed crackdowns on opposition outlets and journalists. The recent case of prosecution of Mzia Amaglobeli, the director of the media outlets Batumelebi and Netgazeti further shows the gravity of the situation²⁴.

At the same time, it is not possible to talk about the reform process in the current circumstances. Moreover, the halt of USAID funding means that some media and

23 "Georgian Dream to Halt EU Membership Bid," accessed March 5, 2025, see [here](#).

24 "Court Orders Pretrial Detention for Batumelebi and Netgazeti Founder," OC Media, January 14, 2025, see [here](#).

civil society organisations will have to stop operating and this is further supporting GD's agenda to have an authoritarian regime in the country. This will have serious consequences for the society and democracy in the country. Moreover, GD is continuously toughening legislation to further repress society²⁵.

Georgia's political crisis has created a dilemma for the EU. While the country remains part of the EaP and is a candidate country, its democratic backsliding and growing ideological alignment with Russia derails its EU trajectory. The EU has suspended all high-level cooperation with Georgia. In the current situation, engagement with Georgia through the EaP remains possible only on the level of civil society with high level officials being excluded from the EaP formats.

Conclusions

The outcome of the current situation will largely determine Georgia's democratic future. It could lead to GD consolidating its power by further suppressing protests, deepening ties with authoritarian states, and further isolating Georgia from the EU. This scenario will create an erosion of relations with the EU and deeper relations with Russia. Lack of EU unity in response to the ongoing situation is leading to GD's impunity. In the scenario where GD continues to hold power, it is crucial to continue providing support for civil society initiatives and independent media. The EU should strengthen mechanisms for monitoring and reporting human rights violations, ensuring accountability at both domestic and international levels. In a different scenario, with more individual sanctions enacted, the sanctions coupled with public unrest could lead to internal splits in the party and a potential political crisis. In this case, the EU must be prepared to act decisively, providing immediate support to democratic forces and civil society.

Moldova

Political Situation and Domestic Developments

Moldova has been deeply affected by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and it has been confronted with unprecedented hybrid attacks – ongoing disinformation, election interference, and energy blackmailing are a few examples to mention. Since 2022, with the adoption of the new National Security Strategy, Moldova has officially recognised Russia as a threat and re-affirmed its EU direction.

The past couple of years have been extremely challenging for the country. Moldovan Presidential elections and the EU referendum in autumn 2024 have been a target by pro-Russian groups, which used domestic vulnerabilities to influence the results of elections. The campaigns were particularly led by the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor. While, the referendum has passed, albeit with a narrow margin of 50.35% and Maia Sandu secured a second term, at least 39 billion dollars were fuelled into the country to

²⁵ "GD Parliament Moves Forward with Several Repressive Bills," Civil Georgia, accessed March 5, 2025, see [here](#).

destabilise elections²⁶. Additionally, around 140,000 individuals have been identified as recipients of these illicit funds²⁷. The upcoming parliamentary elections later this year will be a major target for Russian campaigns.

The current government, led by the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), has shown a commitment to advancing the EU, yet the multitude of crises has also slowed down the process. Under the current government, Moldova received EU candidate status in 2022 and was invited to open accession negotiations in the summer of 2024. The 1.9 billion euro Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova is supposed to further support Moldova's reforms, particularly socio-economic and fundamental areas²⁸. However, systemic issues, including limited administrative resources, ongoing external challenges and socio-economic disparities, continue to hinder the reform process.

The political environment remains polarised. While PAS holds a majority, its dominance has sparked criticism of centralising power and a lack of inclusivity in political dialogue. Opposition parties have leveraged public dissatisfaction over economic challenges, energy costs, and inflation to mobilise protests against the government. Moreover, the reform process has been repeatedly side-tracked by multiple crises, including those triggered by Russia, as well as Moldova's own weak administrative capacity. This has created grievances among the population and raised criticism towards current authorities. Raising energy prices and economic challenges have impacted the population, as around 30% live under the poverty level. The 2025 energy crisis, which particularly affects Transnistria, also had implications on prices on the right bank, leading to an increase of 70% of electricity costs²⁹.

Russia's decision to stop delivering gas to Moldova, –previously fully destined for the Transnistrian region–is part of its broader strategy to use energy as a geopolitical weapon, aiming to destabilise the current pro-European government ahead of its parliamentary elections in autumn 2025 and raise tensions between Tiraspol and Chisinau. The crisis and the EU's support for Moldova including Transnistria will have implications on the future of the conflict resolution.

Civil Society and the Reform Process

Moldovan civil society has been active in the reform process, particularly in promoting transparency, judicial reform, and anti-corruption measures and in supporting Moldova's EU integration with expertise.

However, despite its contributions, civil society participation is not without challenges.

26 "VIDEO/ Șeful Poliției, Viorel Cernăuțeanu: „Vorbim Despre Peste 39 de Milioane de Dolari Pentru Coruperea Alegătorilor” – Ziarul de Gardă,” accessed February 6, 2025, see [here](#).

27 "VIDEO/ Șeful Poliției, Viorel Cernăuțeanu: „Vorbim Despre Peste 39 de Milioane de Dolari Pentru Coruperea Alegătorilor” – Ziarul de Gardă.”

28 "Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova," Text, European Commission - European Commission, accessed March 6, 2025, see [here](#).

29 "OFICIAL: Prețuri Mai Mari, Începând de Astăzi, La Energie Electrică Și Termică – Ziarul de Gardă,” accessed February 6, 2025, see [here](#).

Civil society organisations often face funding constraints and uneven access to decision-making processes. While the government has increased formal consultations with civil society, these are sometimes criticised for being superficial, with limited integration of feedback into policy outcomes. During interviews, civil society representatives noted that they are consulted primarily when the government lacks expertise, but not systematically, despite official claims that consultation mechanisms exist. Moreover, some civil society actors stated that the government engages only with a small, trusted circle, while broader outreach remains lacking.

Public trust in civil society remains at around 20%, also influenced by pro-Russian narratives framing them as “Western agents” undermining their legitimacy among certain groups³⁰. This highlights the need for targeted public campaigns to counter disinformation and raise awareness of civil society’s role in driving reforms. The halt in US funding has significant implications for Moldovan civil society and media, as well as for the reform process and EU integration.

The Role of the EaP

The EaP framework has been vital in supporting Moldova’s reform efforts and fostering regional cooperation. Key EaP programmes have focused on civil society energy diversification, governance, and cross-border initiatives. For instance, Moldova’s reliance on Russian energy imports has dropped significantly, with the EU facilitating connections to EU energy markets. However, as Moldova moves closer to potential EU membership, this track has become more significant than the EaP.

Recent Ukraine-Moldova cooperation on EU accession further solidified the partnership between Ukraine and Moldova for exchange related to the EU integration process, yet it also shows that Ukraine and Moldova’s paths are becoming more divergent from the other EaP countries.

Conclusions

The developments of Russia’s war against Ukraine and Moscow’s ability to sustain its hybrid war in Moldova will shape the country’s future. While Russia’s direct influence, especially through energy tools, has weakened, its tactics have evolved and it acts as a disruptor, making Moldova’s energy independence and institutional resilience critical. The upcoming Parliamentary will be another test for Moldovan democracy.

Ukraine

Political Context and Domestic Developments

The second Trump Presidency, his renewed engagement with Russia and suspension of military aid for Ukraine have profound implications for the country. The ambition to make Ukraine have a deal with Russia at any costs, without security guarantees and a

³⁰ “Raport-Final-BOP-2024.Pdf,” accessed February 1, 2025, see [here](#).

vision for sustainable long-lasting peace further empowers Russia and its narratives. The potential loss of the US as a partner for Ukraine and the EU, means that the EU has to fill the role of the security guarantor and the stakes are the future of peace in Europe. The US ambition to have elections in Ukraine before a final ceasefire is a dangerous narrative that could weaken the country and its democracy and would play in Russia's hands³¹. Inside the country, the presence of the war has undoubtedly penetrated in all the spheres of Ukraine's society, which has shown incredible resilience. Despite the unprecedented toll that the war is creating, Ukraine shows resilience. The country received EU candidate status and was invited to open accession negotiations with the EU, with the aim to open two chapters for negotiations later this year. An Interagency Working Group to support the negotiation process on Ukraine's accession was created, along with 36 working groups to support Ukraine's accession process.

Reform process during the war

The war has forced Ukraine to adapt its governance structures to function in war conditions, which has implications on freedoms and democracy. Ukraine has been balancing between security and democratic rights, which is a challenge for a country in a war context.

The recent change of relations between the US and Ukraine and increased reaffirmation of support from European partners has brought more unity inside the country. Yet, overall, the ongoing war has led to increased dissatisfaction with how the government is handling the internal challenges, ongoing war, and the tendency towards more centralisation. Martial law, which has been in place since the start of the invasion, comes with certain restrictions related to freedoms and with considerable centralisation of powers in the office of the President. On the other hand, Ukraine has also achieved significant milestones in the reform process, including the judiciary³² and there is some progress in strengthening anti-corruption institutions, including the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO), though more work on addressing high-level corruption should be done³³. The Public Procurement and Public Administration Reform (PAR) is seen as crucial by many civil society representatives for Ukraine's accession process.

Overall, there is a dilemma in pursuing reforms and making conditionality work meaningfully without overburdening the system, as the war puts a human toll on the system. Conditionality and the Ukraine Plan are seen as positive instruments by civil society to bring accountability to the reform process.

Civil Society's role

Ukraine's civil society has been playing an active role in the country's reform process, particularly since 2014. The environment remains permissive, yet there are some

31 "Hastily Organized Elections in Ukraine Would Undermine Democracy and the Conflict Settlement | DGAP," accessed March 5, 2025, see [here](#).

32 "Ukraine 2024 Report.2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy," accessed February 2, 2025, see [here](#).

33 "Ukraine 2024 Report.2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy."

concerns about political pressure on civil society to advocate for reforms. Moreover, the war has constrained civil society's capacity, with many organisations redirecting resources towards humanitarian aid and reconstruction efforts, or joining the military. The halt of US funding will profoundly impact civil society and independent media.

The war has exacerbated restrictions on independent media, with concerns over the government's use of security justifications to limit press freedoms. Trust in media has decreased in the past few years with more and more people switching to Telegram Messenger. Additionally, many public registries remain closed due to access to sensitive information. Yet, it also makes it harder to monitor the recovery and reconstruction process, and there is a demand to open access to some of the information that is not crucial for the country's security.

Ukraine and the EaP: Beyond the Regional Framework

While the EaP initially provided a framework for cooperation and reform, its relevance in the country has decreased as Ukraine advances towards EU membership. Most of Ukraine's progress has been driven by bilateral agreements and accession-focused benchmarks rather than multilateral initiatives under the EaP. Ukraine's commitment to EU accession and reforms has been more of a priority.

Security is crucial for Ukraine and its future, as a country and an EU member. Acknowledging the war reality and adapting the accession process to the long-term security needs is key in the context of Ukraine's resilience and reform process³⁴.

Conclusions

The current geopolitical developments and the outcome of Russia's war against Ukraine will largely determine the future of the EU and of Ukraine. EU and its Member States have increased the focus on security, and it is becoming a key prerequisite for any reform process and a core of EU policies in the country. Should there be negotiations, it remains crucial to ensure security guarantees and EU countries should be prepared to deploy troops. Without lasting peace in Ukraine and the leading role of the EU in the process, it will be a challenge to ensure security and stability in the Eastern Neighbourhood and in Europe.

34 "Bridging Security and Political Governance in Ukraine-EU Relations: How to Calibrate European Integration and Security Cooperation," accessed February 1, 2025, see [here](#).

02

**EU policy in the Eastern
Neighbourhood: ongoing
transformation**

EU policy in the Eastern Neighbourhood: ongoing transformation

The current geopolitical reality—shaped by Trump’s second presidency and its ambitions to challenge the rules-based order, Russia’s ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, and the evolving security architecture and increased role of other actors in the EaP region—marks a transformative moment for the EU and the region. In this context, the EU’s ability to remain a relevant global actor depends on its capacity to adapt and advocate for a rules-based order by strengthening its security and foreign policy role.

While the EaP has already achieved significant progress and remains a valuable asset for civil society, its purpose and functions must be reassessed to align with the new geopolitical reality. At the governmental level, the EaP framework currently offers limited relevance or meaningful engagement on the regional level due to widening differences in governance systems and national priorities. A revised EaP 2.0 should prioritise security, recognise the distinct track of enlargement countries, and acknowledge the increasing divergence among the six EaP states. It could serve as an umbrella framework integrating various EU foreign policy instruments in the region, including connectivity and Black Sea cooperation, cooperation between civil society and youth. Strengthening cooperation with businesses and involving them in decision-making processes would also be beneficial.

Additionally, it should incorporate mechanisms to engage with countries sliding into authoritarianism, with civil society support as a key pillar—especially in environments where democratic space is shrinking. With the halt of USAID funding, greater EU support is expected to fill this gap. Interviews and survey findings indicate that enlargement countries such as Ukraine and Moldova favour bilateral cooperation, including potential collaboration with Georgia if a political change occurs. Armenia could also benefit from learning from these experiences. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan’s authorities remain uninterested in deeper engagement with the EU beyond economic and energy agreements, as long as compliance with the EU’s normative agenda is required.

Addressing the Lack of Sustainable Core Funding for Civil Society

One of the key challenges highlighted was the lack of core funding for civil society. Many organisations face increasingly restrictive operational environments and limited government capacity to implement reforms. The halt in US support will have serious consequences for all the EaP countries, particularly for civil society actors operating in authoritarian regimes – where the funding situation was already challenging.

Creating more flexible and less bureaucratic funding mechanisms, including core

funding, would strengthen civil society's resilience and operational capacity. Support to smaller, regional-based organisations requires easier application process and reporting mechanisms, yet it can be a useful tool to reach out to broader audiences.

Meaningful Involvement of Civil Society

Many interviewees noted that civil society engagement often remains superficial, irregular, and easily deprioritised. The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further reduced accountability mechanisms. Authorities frequently claim a lack of interest from civil society, while civil society actors feel they are only consulted in cases where government expertise is insufficient or a small number of civil society organisations is consulted, that are already working closely with the government. The absence of a structured institutional framework for engagement exacerbates this problem.

There is a pressing need to formalise civil society engagement in policymaking through structured platforms in different policy areas that ensure meaningful consultation and representation across sectors, and backgrounds. This is only currently possible in Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia where civil society operates freely and can be involved in the reform process.

Supporting Civil Society in Authoritarian Regimes

Authoritarian regression and the increasing use of repressive tools remain persistent challenges. The EU must continue offering a viable alternative to authoritarian models while maintaining transparency and consistency in its approaches to avoid accusations of double standards. Support of media and civil society organisations in more repressive environments is key, yet it also requires more flexibility and a needs-based approach, as well as easier reporting tools and mechanisms to receive funding and adjust activities based on the country developments.

Hybrid Threats and Election Interference

Given the ongoing war, reforms should also focus on enhancing institutional resilience, including cybersecurity and energy infrastructure, as well as civil society ability to identify and address hybrid threats. Establishing mechanisms to share lessons learned from Ukraine and Moldova could help strengthen regional and EU-wide resilience. Additionally, lesson learnt from Moldovan elections could be used to adapt elections observation methods to account for foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and other hybrid threats that seek to undermine democratic processes.



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