

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

Working Group 1

Online Meeting, 17 June 2025

Report

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) Working Group (WG1) held its first meeting of 2025 online on 17 June 2025. The event, spanning two sessions, included opening remarks, an EU overview, a presentation of country updates, an update on the work plan and advocacy activities and concluded with the presentation of the WG1 policy paper.

EU overview

It was highlighted that mounting internal and external challenges are confronting the European Union. Internally, political developments in Hungary and Slovakia raise concerns, while externally, the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in January 2025 has heightened global insecurity and instability. The EU's limited response to events such as Georgia's contested elections highlights its need to become more efficient and decisive. In response, the EU is placing increased focus on security and defense, with the European Commission assigning dedicated portfolios to these areas. Enlargement remains a key priority, particularly the integration of Ukraine and Moldova, alongside the hope for Georgia's return to the EU path. The region's strategic importance is underscored by the adoption of a new Black Sea strategy aimed at enhancing connectivity, security, and growth. Nonetheless, the EU faces the challenge of balancing its interests with the promotion of human rights and support for civil society.

Session 1 – Country updates

Ukraine

Ukraine continues to strengthen its engagement with the EU integration process through structured coordination and active civil society involvement. The National Platform has recently adopted a gender policy and prioritised integrating a human rights approach across all official documents. Regular meetings have been established to ensure these values are embedded in the country's reform efforts. However, especially in the recovery and reconstruction agenda, human rights are often overlooked in favor of economic

interests. Civil society remains committed to ensuring these principles are not sidelined. On the ground, the situation remains critical as Russian terrorist attacks on Ukrainian cities continue, most recently coinciding with the G7 summit in Canada. Meanwhile, Ukraine's legislative alignment with EU standards is progressing. The European Commission has submitted its report on Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) to the EU Council. Reports on Cluster 2 (Internal Market) and Cluster 6 (External Relations) are expected by the end of June, while screening is currently ongoing for Cluster 4 (Green Agenda).

Moldova

Moldova continues to make significant progress in its EU accession negotiations, with important reforms in the rule of law sector, including the vetting of judges and prosecutors and the reform of the Court of Justice. However, the justice system remains fragile, with reforms only partially implemented and a wave of resignations among judges and prosecutors highlighting ongoing challenges. Despite the political will, progress is often hindered by limited resources and weak accountability mechanisms. A significant step forward came in June with the adoption of an electoral corruption bill, introducing stricter penalties for vote buying, illegal financing, and fraud, along with fast-track legal procedures for such cases. A new national security bill has also passed its reading, expanding the security framework to cover cyber, economic, and environmental threats. Civil society continues to play a vital role in supporting EU integration, actively contributing to the transposition of new directives. However, concerns have been raised over a draft foreign agent law introduced by the opposition, unlikely to pass in the current parliament, alongside recent smear campaigns and legal harassment targeting human rights defenders. Key recommendations include promoting merit-based appointments, ensuring transparent selection processes for leadership roles, prioritizing the vetting of prosecutors, and deepening civil society's involvement in the EU integration process.

Georgia

Georgia is experiencing growing political repression under the ruling Georgian Dream party, which continues to promote anti-liberal and anti-Western narratives. The government has increasingly embraced populist rhetoric while stalling the country's EU accession process, now suspended until 2028. Public protests have been ongoing since November 2024, largely in response to the controversial "foreign agent" law passed in April 2025, which criminalises NGOs and independent media. Over 50 individuals are currently in pre-trial detention, including a 21-year-old sentenced to four years for alleged violence against police. Smear campaigns against critical media and civil society activists have intensified, while recent legal amendments have expanded definitions of "hooliganism" to further limit freedom of expression. Despite mounting pressure, opposition voices remain strong, though they reject the legitimacy of current electoral

institutions. Civil society organizations continue to advocate for human rights and liberal democracy, but face declining support and shrinking resources, with no long-term strategy in place to sustain their work.

Belarus

There has been no significant progress in Belarus, as the country continues its steady descent into a totalitarian regime. Civil society structures are being systematically dismantled, forcing the activists left in the country to operate underground. Over the past five years, more than 2,000 CSOs have been officially shut down, with the true number likely even higher. Grassroots movements persist, but they operate in isolation and remain largely invisible to the international community. Most activists have relocated, particularly to Lithuania and Poland, where they continue their work in exile. The legal environment remains highly repressive, with no registered opposition parties permitted. Elections are mere administrative procedures as there is no free campaigning, independent media, or public participation. Freedom of expression continues to deteriorate and remains a central concern for human rights defenders. Peaceful criticism, especially online, is often met with arrest and persecution. The issue of political prisoners remains critical, with only a small group released this year and limited communication with the outside world.

Azerbaijan

There is no democratic development in Azerbaijan but increasing restrictions on civil society and political opposition. Media outlets that expose corruption face heightened pressure, and opposition party members continue to be arrested. NGOs encounter serious challenges in both registration and operation, especially due to laws that prohibit access to foreign funding. While pro-government and loyal NGOs receive state support, independent organizations are prevented to access these funds and face significant bureaucratic hurdles. The space for civic engagement is shrinking, and international partnerships are being weakened by these repressive measures. Freedom of movement is also severely restricted, with closed land borders and limited travel options. Azerbaijan is now shifting toward a security-focused approach, sidelining democratic principles. This trend is likely to worsen amid rising regional tensions, particularly with the ongoing conflict involving Iran and Israel. Although opposition parties are formally registered, their activities are confined to a very narrow and controlled space.

Armenia

At the end of March, Armenia took a symbolic step toward deeper European integration with the adoption of a law launching the accession process to the EU. However, opposition groups argue that Armenia's obligations under the Eurasian Economic Union

conflict with this direction. Internally, reforms continue under the EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform, which is currently preparing its 2024 report on CEPA implementation, with a strong focus on democratic reforms. A major obstacle remains institutional capacity, particularly within the Ministry of Justice, which lacks the expertise and momentum needed to drive reforms forward. Parliamentary elections scheduled for next year are expected to trigger hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns, increasing the urgency of support for civil society actors in the area of media literacy and countering manipulation. Tensions are also rising between the Armenian Apostolic Church and Prime Minister Pashinyan. The Church's interference in politics, coupled with its alleged support for Russian-aligned opposition forces and involvement in corruption scandals, has diminished its public credibility, especially among those who support a pro-European trajectory. Finally, civil society remains deeply concerned about the fate of 23 Armenian prisoners of war still held by Azerbaijan, emphasizing the need for international pressure and diplomatic engagement.

Session 2 – Work Plan and Advocacy Activities

Next delegate selection to be launched by the end of 2025

The selection for the 2026-2028 cycle of EaP CSF delegates will be launched by October 2025 with a call for applications published on the website and will conclude by the end of March 2026. The delegate selection is a lengthy process involving several parties including WG Coordinators, EU delegations and National Platforms. The EaP CSF Steering Committee oversees finalising the selection. For EU delegates, the EU members will also be involved in the selection process. Applicants to the delegate selection process must be Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). The criteria generally considered include non-partisanship, involvement in the EaP thematic areas and the carrying out of work that relates to European values. The EaP CSF Steering Committee is additionally currently revising the thematic and structural quotas which should be adopted in July. Each cycle, up to 160 delegates are selected, including 20 per National Platform and up to 40 delegates from the EU.

State of play & looking forward of WG1 activities for 2025, Eastern Partnership political and policy developments, including the official EaP Multi-annual Work Plan 2025-2027

The Polish Presidency of the Council of the EU started on the 1st of January 2025 and runned until the 30th of June. Reinvigorating the discussion around the Eastern Partnership initiative is at the core of Polish Presidency. This commitment has been deployed through the elaboration of an informative document, a non-paper on the Eastern

Partnership that has been supported by over 16 out of 27 Member States, which is beyond the traditional number of supporters of the Eastern Partnership initiative. The EaP CSF has advocated for the continuation of the EaP initiative towards the Polish Presidency and produced a position paper based on the resolution adopted last November in Vienna. The work of the EaP CSF will continue throughout the upcoming Presidencies; the EaP CSF will shortly intervene in the Eastern Neighborhood preparatory group of the Council of the EU on the importance of role of civil society in the EaP initiative. On 20 March, the Forum took part in an official meeting with high-level civil servants from the EaP countries and the EU, the so-called Senior Officials Meeting, where it reiterated the strategic importance of the EaP initiative, and the need to further strengthen synergies with other dimensions, such as the Black Sea. The Forum recently submitted a memorandum to the European Commission in response of a call for evidence on the upcoming joint communication of the Commission and External Action regarding a strategic approach to the Black Sea. In this memorandum, the Forum highlighted the importance to ensure cooperation between civil society from the Black Sea basin and beyond with the Eastern Partnership civil society, namely the Forum. At the Senior Officials Meeting, the EU presented its plan of activities for the upcoming 3 years regarding the Eastern Partnership initiative. The main novelty compared to previous years it that this plan is now multi-annual and covers 2025 to 2027. In there are all official Eastern Partnership activities starting from 2025, including the EaP Youth Conference and our Civil Society Summit next December. The priority areas of the Multi-Annual Work Plan, based on the 2020 Joint Staff Working Document of the European Commission, include: complementarity with the enlargement process; security, democratic and societal resilience; economic development, green transition and regional connectivity; civil society and youth. The next Senior Officials Meeting is foreseen in autumn; this will be an occasion to further improve the Work Plan.

EaP Index 2025

Eastern Partnership Index is a data-driven monitoring tool crafted by independent civil society from the region and developed by the EaP CSF. It tracks political and policy developments in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – focusing on their progress toward democratisation, sustainable development and European integration. The Index is grounded in rigorous research and local expertise, with findings validated through peer review. It serves as both a benchmark and advocacy tool, widely used in EU and regional policymaking. The 2025 edition, set to launch in the end of June, will inform advocacy work of the EaP CSF and provide independent input for the EU's 2025 country assessments, as well as contribute more broadly to policy debates, reform efforts, and stakeholder engagement across the region and in Brussels.

Session 3 – Discussion with Ms Anastasia Pociumban, WG1 policy paper author, Research Fellow at German Council on Foreign Relations

WG1 policy paper ‘Advancing democratisation in the Eastern Partnership countries: the role of civil society in national reforms, and European integration’ highlights the role of civil society in driving national reforms and supporting EU integration across the EaP countries. A key finding is the increasing influence of the geopolitical context, especially Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine, on the region’s trajectory. The EU attempted to position itself as a more assertive geopolitical actor, while the weakening of multilateral institutions and the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency have added to regional instability. The potential U.S.-brokered deal between Russia and Ukraine further contributes to uncertainty. Approaching 2027, the paper argues that the EaP policy framework needs a serious revamp as, currently, does not reflect the full extent of divergence in the region. Ukraine and Moldova are advancing on the EU enlargement track, while Georgia faces an authoritarian drift. Armenia is recalibrating its foreign policy amid continued Russian influence, and Azerbaijan focuses on energy ties while intensifying its crackdown on civil society. Belarusian civil society operates largely in exile as the regime deepens its alignment with Russia. Nevertheless, civil society remains crucial in promoting transparency and holding governments accountable but faces shrinking resources, limited core funding, and restricted access to policymaking, often only engaged when governments lack expertise. Key recommendations include a more flexible, less bureaucratic EaP 2.0 approach, diversified EU funding, stronger formal engagement mechanisms for civil society, and increased attention to hybrid threats. Maintaining a credible EU accession path and offering stronger political backing, particularly for countries like Georgia and Armenia, are also emphasized as strategic priorities.