

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

Working Group 4

Online Meeting, 8 May 2025

Report

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) Working Group 4 (WG4) held its first meeting of 2025 online on 8 May 2025. The event, spanning three sessions, included a presentation of country updates, an update on the work plan and advocacy activities and concluded with a stakeholder session.

Session 1 – Country updates

Ukraine

Russian war of aggression in Ukraine continues to be the main challenge in the country. There are very limited resources in the government budget and the loss of human capital decreased mobility. There is a limitation in traveling for men aged from 18 to 60. The education infrastructure is destroyed and there is a decrease in the number of research and funding activities. Two bilateral meetings have been held between Ukraine and the EU, resulting in a proposal to create a research and innovation coalition to support Ukraine. Ministry plans for the future are ongoing as there is a need for reforms around education in line with the EaP post-2025 priorities. Plans include involving more women and girls in engineering, intelligence innovation and defence sector, in line with the priority to develop resilient, fair and inclusive societies in EaP countries. It was highlighted the need to understand the new political reality and of developing tools to work on brain drain and brain gain. Finally, it was stressed the need for more active participation in Horizon Europe Calls, cluster 2 “Culture, creativity and inclusive society”.

Moldova

The main achievements towards European integration in the country have been the launch of accession negotiations, the organisation of a national referendum, and the presidential elections that brought pro-EU candidate as leader. The geo-political context is difficult as tensions remain high around Transnistria. The role of civil society organisations remains important in the context as they participate in round-table discussions, ensuring public participation and a level of transparency in decision-making processes. Contributions of members from the Moldovan National Platform (MNP) include public statements and policy briefs. They were additionally involved in 33 working groups

focused on thematic EU negotiation chapters, including ones relevant for WG4 around Science and Research as well as Education and Culture. Resolution on youth adopted during a quarterly advocacy group meeting by the National Youth Council of Moldova. The resolution covers five priority areas for youth: Democracy, education, economy, security, health. Moreover, civil society called on national and local authorities as well as on development partners to prioritise youth in policy and program implementation. Authorities are open to collaboration, but maintaining transparency in the bilateral screening phase is crucial.

Georgia

The Georgian government has the intention to close the civil space. Three laws are being drafted to limit CSOs capacities and to limit civic activism. Over 1200 people have been hit with high fines and at least 53 have been jailed. Nonetheless, civil society remain strong and the main CSOs active around in rule of law and democracy are still functioning. Without the agreement of the government, donors cannot financially support the organisations. A lot of our colleagues stopped working because they were shut down by the government. Every week, it is getting increasingly discriminatory. Civil society organisations are expecting a lot of pressure from the government to stop any working relationship with the EU.

Belarus

The government continues to spread propaganda. New discriminatory laws require organisations to register themselves, and many civil society activists face jail if they do not comply. When it comes to education, patriotic songs are often being played at school and kids are sometimes required to wear military clothing. Additionally, travel options are limited as visas to the EU are difficult to access. Within the country, support to civil society from the government is limited or symbolic. Many civil society representatives are being jailed. Grants allocated to civil society organisations within the country could be beneficial.

Azerbaijan

Key updates from civil society in Azerbaijan were presented around education, youth and culture. On education, 125 undergraduate and 375 graduate scholarship holders were awarded for the 2024-2025 academic year within the framework of the “State Program for 2022-2028 for the Education of Young People in Prestigious Higher Education Institutions of Foreign Countries”. On youth, young people who successfully pass various exams and reach the finals can receive a mentoring program from cabinet ministers. On culture, organisations involved in cultural, research and innovation projects within the Azerbaijani National Platform (AzNP) operate within the limits of their capabilities. Issues they encounter include difficulties accessing foreign funding and obtaining visas.

Armenia

Positive developments were highlighted for CSOs in 2024. The Armenian parliament adopted a law initiating Armenia's EU integration process. Additionally, civil society participated in the launch of the national youth strategy for 2024-2026 and gathered input for the Anti-corruption strategy adopted for 2023-2026. Nonetheless, several challenges also persist, as many CSOs have been impacted by the USAID funding freeze in the country. There is also a lack of inclusive youth engagement in rural areas. Finally, it was suggested to establish permanent dialogue between the authorities, civil society and international partners, as well as to promote research and policy analysis with European partners.

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 ran 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.

Activities included in the EaP Multi-annual Work Plan 2025-2027

The Youth Conference, co-organised by the Forum and the European Commission, is part of the official EaP Work Plan 2025-2027. Additionally, the 7th Informal Working Group Meeting on Research and Innovation will take place on 27 and 28 November in Berlin. Two representatives of Working Group 4 will participate on behalf of the Forum. Also in November, the Annual peer learning activity on validation of non-formal and informal learning will be an activity where the Forum is interested in attending. The EU4Youth days in Brussels will be organised most likely the first week of October, the European Commission is in the lead of the organisation.

EaP Index 2025

The 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.

Presentation of the activities performed by WG4 stemming from the Work Plan, presented by Hovsep Khurshudyan

The activities undertaken by WG4 Coordinators and members include advocacy, awareness raising and networking in different fields. On 28 May 2025, WG4 members Sintija Bernava and Ivan Kulchytsky participated in the 6th informal Working Group meeting on Research and Innovation. The meeting served as an opportunity to discuss the integration of the Eastern Partnership partner countries into the European research area. Additionally, the WG4 meeting of 24-25 June 2024 had discussed the priorities of the Working Group and drafted its plan. The plan was further developed through several online meetings. Hovsep Khurshudyan as WG4 Coordinator had also submitted a proposal for a side session at the 1st EaP CSF Civil Society Summit intitled 'The European aspirations of the people of EaP countries' which was selected by the Steering Committee as one of the four delegate-led sessions. Both WG4 coordinators had furthermore participated in several online and offline meetings, including SC meetings on preparations of the 1st EaP CSF Civil Summit and preparations for its resolution. The WG4 meeting in the margins of the EaP CSF Civil Society Summit also enabled members to gather and coordinate their input for the resolution. Finally, Ms. Nino Jibuti had been hired as consultant to work on the elaboration of the WG4 policy paper, "Resilient democracies in the Eastern Partnership and the EU, strengthening capacities of the civil societies". The group's main achievements in 2024 have been on the one hand the elaboration of the policy paper, aimed to assess the implementation of the EaP priorities post-2020. On the other hand, the European Commission has integrated the comments of WG4 members in the final document pertaining to R&I following the 6th informal Working Group meeting on Research and Innovation. Finally, the WG4 Facebook group has been active as activities, calls, surveys and other relevant information were disseminated.

Session 3 – Stakeholder session

The launch was organised as a hybrid roundtable with WG4 members invited to join online. The panel included the following panellists:

Introduction

- **Mr Martin Vane**, Interim Director, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF)

Mr Martin Vane briefly welcomed participants to the session and thanked the Speakers for attending.

Presentations

- **Ms Silvia Bojinova**, Team leader for interinstitutional and multilateral relations, Unit 03 “International cooperation – Europe and Americas”, DG RTD, European Commission.

Ms Silvia Bojinova presented Horizon Europe as the largest program for research and innovation and the strong forum of international cooperation. Associated countries are treated as EU States and can discuss the work plan, access trainings and become part of the network. The program’s main goals when launching in 2021 were to strengthen the European Union scientific and technological basis to help third countries and EU member states to integrate in the European research area as well as to boost competitiveness and create more jobs. Research and Innovation is important for the EaP agenda and the region because it strengthens economic resilience, it creates growth, competitiveness, and further digitalisation.

In March 2022, the European Commission adopted a joint communication on the EaP Policy, concentrating on reinforcing the resilience of EaP countries and creating a space for common knowledge and innovation.

Among the core recommendations for the future are to provide more funding opportunities for collaboration between EaP researchers and European scientific investors, further funding opportunities for awareness raising on Horizon Europe, and to push EaP governments further to use the program.

- **Mr Hovsep Khurshudyan**, EaP Coordinator of EaP CSF Working Group 4 ‘Contacts between people’.

Mr Hovsep Khurshudyan thanked Ms Silvia Bojinova for her intervention. He concluded the meeting by reminding the group of the three main priorities of the WG4 Work Plan 2024-2025 which are:

- Priority 1. Democratic Resilience and Civic Engagement
- Priority 2. Rethinking EaP // New Formats for Inner-EaP and EaP-EU Relations
- Priority 3. Lifelong Learning and Innovation