

## Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Working Group 5

### Online Meeting, 6 May 2025

### Short report for distribution

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) Working Group 5 (WG5) held its first meeting of 2025 online on 6 May 2025. The event, spanning two sessions, included a presentation of country updates, an update on the work plan and advocacy activities.

#### Session 1 – Country updates

##### *Ukraine*

Speakers lamented the pause of social dialogue due to the war measures which stopped all legislative work and paused dialogue between unions and employers. There is an urgent need to increase guarantees for social labour and help organise workers to defend their rights. This is particularly true as the SME sector is growing and the level of social dialogue in this particular sector is very low, even more so in the regions where the process is difficult to manage. The EaP CSF WG5 is the only platform where some of these organisations can expose their issues. The review of the labour code poses several issues. The first version presented in 2024 was criticised for the lack of public consultations. This led to the drafting of a second version in December 2024 while the first version was still in the process. This second version includes new provisions – including one for instance on video surveillance of workers - rendering the comparison impossible with the first version. This illustrates the unsatisfactory process of consultation and social dialogue in the country and stresses further, if necessary, the need to hold social dialogue and consultations to international standards.

##### *Moldova*

In the tripartite commission (union, business, government) in Moldova, there is a national commission for consultations which gathers all three sides. This commission should gather members every month and while it hasn't always been respected, in 2025 we see an improvement with a meeting every month so far. Unions are included in the 35 Working Groups created within the framework of the EU negotiations. The main issues currently being is on the minimum wage. We ask that minimum wage is based on the EU directive (50% of the average salary when now it is only 35%). So far, we managed to increase it slightly (+10% increase). Other topics of discussion include laws on employment, state budget, medical and social insurances.

##### *Georgia*

The political situation is affecting workers' rights and the development of social dialogue. According to the legislation, there should be one meeting every three months, but there are almost no meetings at the moment. The situation got really dramatic for workers in the public service last year. Civil servants accused of not supporting the government are now receiving short-term contracts which can be terminated anytime. Georgian unions reached out to the ILO for their opinion but are still waiting. Among other issues high on the agenda are the absence of gender equality protection and the protection of informal workers. We call on the EU to increase pressure on the Georgian government in all possible ways. Donors must also keep supporting Georgian organisations.

### *Belarus*

The situation with independent trade unions is getting worse. Since 2022, the government has been systematically destroying them. Social dialogue has been crushed by the government alongside the independent trade unions. Representatives of the Confederation of Trade Unions and smaller trade unions were arrested and put into prison. Some trade union representatives are still waiting for court hearings. There are currently about 5,000 political prisoners in Belarus. The Belarus Congress was declared an "extremist organisation" and had to go into exile. Some of its members still live and work in the country despite the risks. Inside Belarus, some companies are under sanctions and the government is trying to retain the employees and keeping them from leaving the country. They create barriers for them to receive work certificates and students now have to work for the government for up to 10 years. Doctors are also tied to their workplaces by withholding work certificates from them to prevent getting it abroad. The public consultations are on hold: neither environmental, social nor urban norms are being taken into account since 2020. There is a permanent moratorium on this. We are trying to inform the public and there was an attempt to collect signatures against one project. But even this was stopped by the government and people that initiated collection of signatures arrested.

### *Azerbaijan*

The Tripartite Commission on Social and Economic Issues is preparing the General Collective Agreement. The Commission includes representatives of employers, trade unions and state bodies. The influence of employers and trade unions is weak, and the real influence of civil society is very limited. The law "on public participation" in Azerbaijan creates broad legal opportunities for the effective participation of NGOs in making decisions of public importance. According to this law, public councils consisting of representatives of civil society have been established at state bodies, ministries and committees. The Public Council under the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population is one of the active public councils. NGOs can introduce current issues to the agenda through the Public Council. NGOs monitor the testing and oral interview stages of the recruitment process of state agencies and state-owned companies. According to

the requirement of the Law “On Public Participation”, public organisations participate in the discussion of bills in the parliament and in public hearing. Active participation is taken by NGOs, especially in issues related to labour rights. Currently, the main challenges are the lack of institutionalised cooperation format with the Azerbaijan Trade Union Confederation, the lack of institutionalised cooperation with trade union organisations, challenges faced by NGOs and weak interest of state bodies in the problem. The key priorities for the coming months are the establishment of a permanent, institutionalised discussion and cooperation format with the Azerbaijan Trade Union Confederation, expanding cooperation with Trade Union Organisations, conducting a republican forum on the protection of labour rights once a year and organising specialised trainings for NGOs.

### *Armenia*

The confederation of trade unions of Armenia (CTUA) is the only national trade union center and is recognised as a social partner of the Government of Armenia. CTUA is a member of the working group combating human trafficking and exploitation in Armenia, raising awareness on labour trafficking. It plays a role in shaping national laws and policies related to labour, social, economic and professional issues, as well as social protection. The CTUA regularly engages with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, other ministries and Standing Committee on labour and social affairs of the National Assembly (more collaboration needed with public authorities). CTUA is part of a tripartite consultation system and plays an active role in consultation with national authorities. The tripartite committee has not been operational since October 2023 due to the absence of the republican collective agreement. Representatives are currently working on the draft republican collective agreement, hoping for its signing soon. Among the key discussions CTUA is currently involved in are the amendment of the Labor Code and other legal acts, the reduction of working hours, the draft law on compulsory health insurance, occupational health and safety and the draft of policies and strategies, especially about employment. CTUA has three representatives in the Armenia-EU CEPA civil society platform, monitoring the Agreement’s implementation. CTUA also writes advisory opinions for the Government, especially on freedom of association, labour and social rights.

## **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.