



Structured consultation on the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020

CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE

Country Report: Azerbaijan

This report offers the perspectives of Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum member organisations from Azerbaijan on the future of the Eastern Partnership following its tenth anniversary year. It is one of a series of six country reports, with other editions covering Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The findings presented here are the result of a comprehensive process of internal consultation, conducted in October 2019 in order to inform the EaP CSF's response to DG NEAR's structured consultation on the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020.

The official DG NEAR consultation addressed the fields of 'Economic and Human Capital Development', 'Good Governance, Rule of Law, Security Cooperation', 'Development of Bilateral and Multilateral Partnership with the EU and among EaP Countries', 'Improving Strategic Communication and Visibility', and 'Other Areas'. For the purposes of its own internal consultation, the EaP CSF chose to organise these fields into the following themes:

1. Economic and Human Capital Development
2. Good Governance, Rule of Law, Security Cooperation
3. EU-EaP and Intra-EaP Cooperation: Ensuring Inclusiveness and Differentiation
4. Boosting EU Visibility in the EaP Region
5. Strengthening the Role of Civil Society

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Structured Consultation on Eastern Partnership

The civil society perspective: Country Report Azerbaijan

SUMMARY

The EaP CSF prepared its response to DG NEAR's structured consultation on the future of the Eastern Partnership by launching a comprehensive process of internal consultation of its membership base. The internal consultation was based on three pillars: six in-country focus groups, four online focus groups and one online questionnaire combining qualitative and quantitative elements. Over 200 civil society organisations participated in at least one pillar of the consultation. The results presented below offer a **detailed overview of the input received from Azerbaijan**. A total of 31 Azerbaijani civil society organisations participated in the consultation process (1 or more pillars): 19 organisations took part in the online survey, 9 took part in the in-country focus group and 3 in the online focus groups.

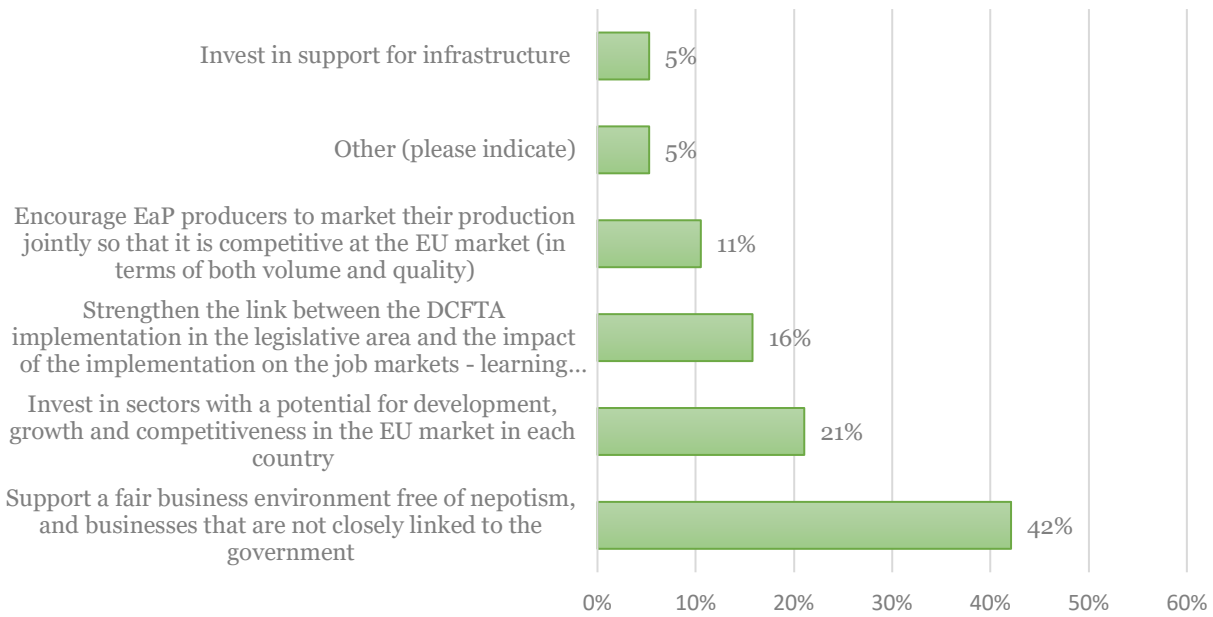
1. ECONOMIC AND HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

The results of the online survey of Azerbaijani organisations suggest **the most urgent and effective measure through which the EU should support sustainable economic development in the EaP region is to push for a fair business environment free of nepotism (42%)**. The EU should continue offering incentives for policies aimed at promoting a fair business environment and levelling the field for regular competition. **Some 21% of respondents suggest the EU should focus on investing into sectors with potential for development, growth and competitiveness in the EU single market** in each EaP country in order to champion sustainable economic development.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In your opinion, what would be the most urgent and effective measure that the EU should promote to support sustainable economic development in the EaP region? (you can choose only one)



Recommendations

Supporting sectors with a potential for development, growth and competitiveness in the EU single market

- Support the development of the agriculture sector and compliance with food standards and security, as well as non-oil sectors and diversification of the manufacturing industry; focus on the development of the green economy and renewable energy sources.
- Support local tourism as a means of targeting economic development in the regions; such a focus can help to create more jobs and promoting shared values.
- Push for Azerbaijan to accede to the WTO; economic reforms cannot deepen without membership of the World Trade Organisation.
- Increase Azerbaijan's ability to operate as a logistics and transport hub; strengthen governance of the logistics and transport sector in addition to infrastructure investment; a comprehensive approach should be developed for the transport sector, including the establishment of coordination mechanisms among different transport segments in terms of vision, planning and investments.

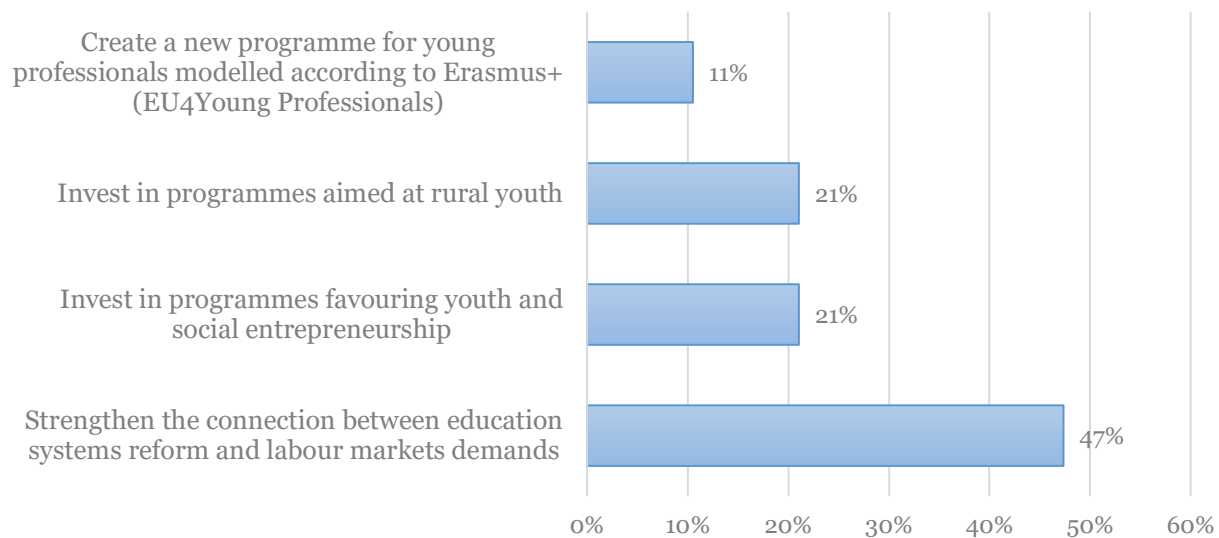


Fair business environment

- Boost economic and human capital development by supporting the establishment of a multi-stakeholder dialogue platform involving government, civil society and business; the platform could facilitate the creation of flexible funding mechanisms for social innovation, as well as sub-national development initiatives to support local SMEs.
- Continue addressing gaps in access to finance and financial infrastructure.
- Support business actor study tours to see how the business environment is regulated in other EaP countries and the EU; support the organisation of business forums of EaP countries focusing on local and cross-border business development and trade opportunities.

HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

What would be the most urgent and effective measure that the EU should promote to further empower youth and address the economic challenges they are facing? (you can choose only one)



In Azerbaijan, 47% of civil society respondents believe the EU should focus on **strengthening the connection between education system reforms and labour market demand** as the most urgent priority in order to support the development of human capital. With 40% of the population below 25 years of age, creating stronger ties between the labour market and the education system (including vocational education and training) is a key investment for the long-term economic resilience of the country. Supporting and **investing in programmes favouring youth and social entrepreneurship** is considered as the most effective measure to take in the near future by 21% of respondents of the survey in order to further empower youth and address the economic challenges they face.



Recommendations

Education and labour market

- Support the government in the elaboration of an employment strategy targeting young people and women in particular; the gender equality aspect should be better mainstreamed throughout the strategy and follow-up legislation.
- Help create a more sustainable working environment by focusing on tackling corruption and monopolies in order to prevent labour force migration outflows.
- Focus on new programmes supporting inclusive education, targeting disadvantaged young people who do not currently benefit from programmes like Erasmus+.
- Support the establishment of new areas of vocational education and skills development centres in the rural areas of the country.
- Support changes to tax legislation, the introduction of a minimum wage policy and benefits for hiring young people so that the employers are incentivised to employ them; the mismatch between the skills obtained through education and those needed in the labour market is wide and employers need to be motivated to hire young people.

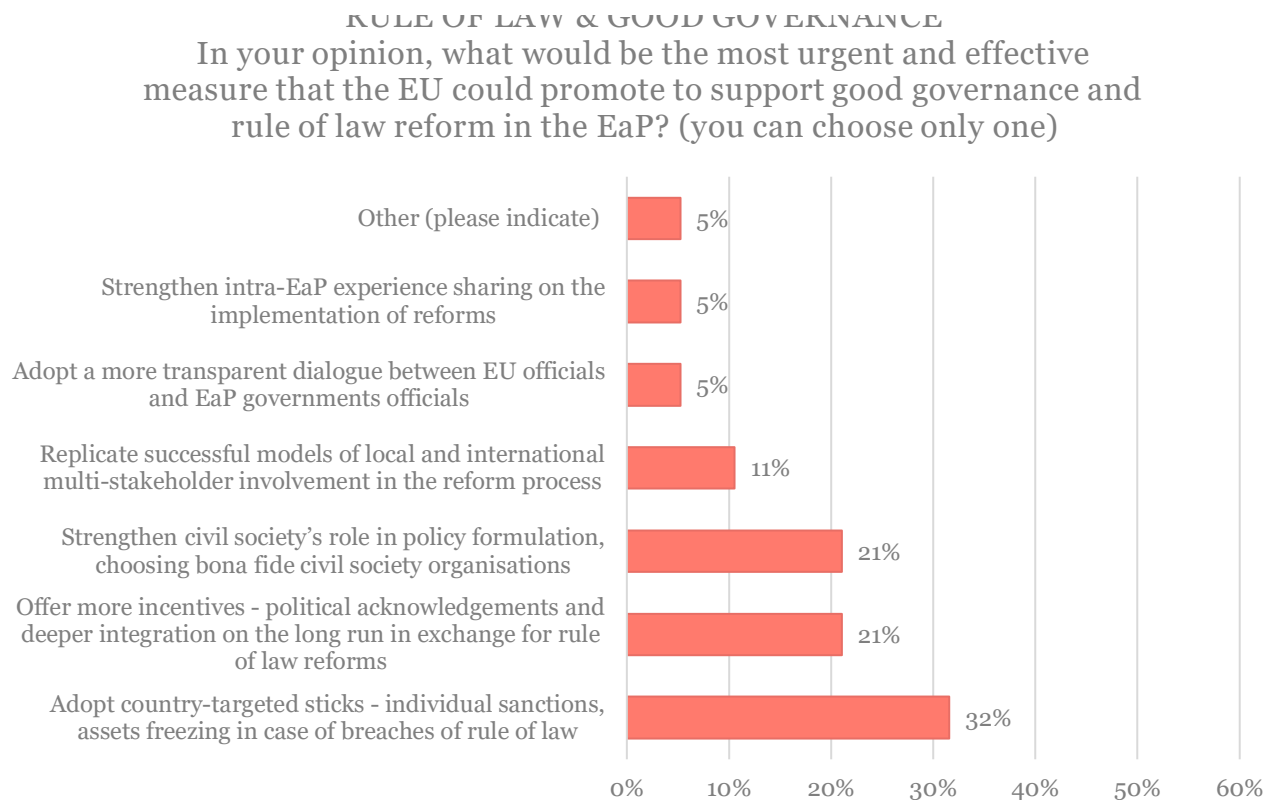
Youth and mobility

- Increase support to young people through strengthening scholarship programmes and study tours.
- Encourage youth entrepreneurship by connecting young people to start-up centres and offering them mentoring through visits by experienced entrepreneurs.
- Support youth entrepreneurship by further easing access to existing credit loans, creating new credit loan schemes, or providing guarantee schemes or subsidies.
- Support the further development of the professional skills of young entrepreneurs, including through an Erasmus-type programme for business development, which could organise study tours for young entrepreneurs to EU member states.
- Support the visa facilitation process for the citizens of Azerbaijan.
- Support the human rights dimension of economic policies strongly; young people are leaving the country not only for economic reasons but also for political ones; securing a more enabling environment for civil society, which remains the last niche for independent thinking, would help to reduce the brain drain from the country



2. GOOD GOVERNANCE, RULE OF LAW, SECURITY COOPERATION

Over **31% of survey respondents** in Azerbaijan believe that in order to support good governance and rule of law reform in the EaP countries, the EU should **adopt country-targeted “sticks” in the form of individual sanctions and assets freezing in case of proven breaches of the rule of law**. Some 21% of respondents suggest the EU should **focus on strengthening the role of civil society in policy formulation, choosing bona fide organisations**. The same proportion (21%) favours the EU offering more incentives and political acknowledgments, as well as deeper integration on the long run, in exchange for the implementation of rule of law reforms in the country.



Recommendations

Rule of law

- Support deep and comprehensive reforms of the justice sector and judiciary, ensuring better access to justice and greater transparency and predictability of judgements and application of the law. Despite the adoption of several reform programmes since the mid-2000s, the situation has not improved; judicial independence and access to justice are also key for attracting and retaining potential investors.



- Introduce a permanent monitoring mission embedded within the EU Delegation in order to put in place a sustainable mechanism and produce regular reports based on fact-finding activities targeting rule of law, democratic standards of governance, and human rights.
- Suspend EU funds to programmes implemented in the country in case of serious deterioration of the rule of law.
- Support the design and implementation of reforms by scaling up broad stakeholder support, including social partners and civil society, in order to engage in policy dialogue.
- Reach an agreement with the government, facilitating the process of CSO funding and registration. The complex legal framework preventing the registration and funding of CSOs has reduced the capacity and level of engagement of civil society significantly over the past 5 years.
- Scale up support for independent media; support centres for the mutual exchange of information for media outlets in the region.
- Implement the human rights-based approach in EU funding policy and funds allocated to the government; together with the government, formulate a formal agreement or code of conduct, where binding norms on human rights are spelled out, alongside effective measures in case of grave human rights violations.
- Support targeted training of government officials on beneficial ownership, asset declaration, open contracting, budget transparency, and open government.

Security

- Support state institutions in achieving better capabilities to address cyber-threats; support legislative as well as institutional reform to improve the cyber-resilience of the country.
- Support training on cybersecurity and cybercrime for local officials, focusing namely on recruitment techniques via social networks and social engineering; support inclusion of cyber security courses into the education curricula of high schools and universities.
- Support the resilience of civil society; support training of civil society actors in new technologies and secure conduct (face-recognition technology, laptop cameras, etc.).
- Invest in media literacy with a focus on education and training in the local language; support sharing experiences from EU countries on how to increase society's resilience to cyber-threats.

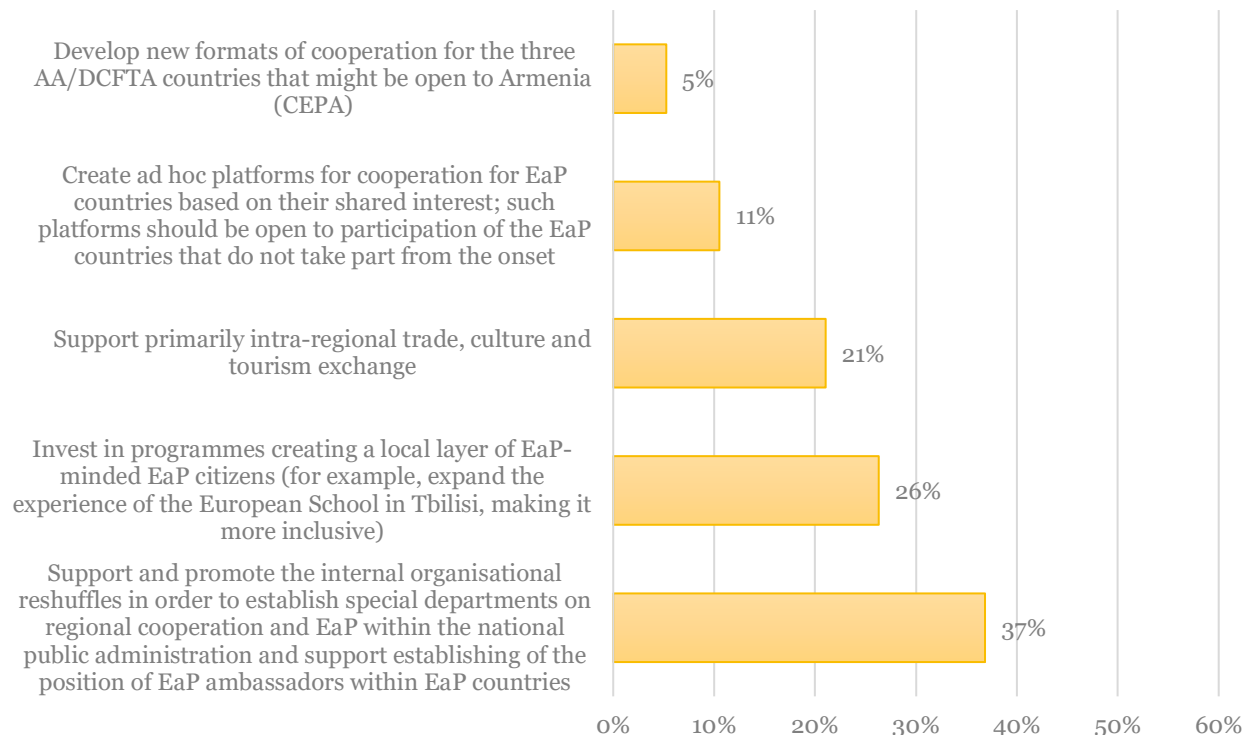


3. EU-EAP AND INTRA-EAP COOPERATION: ENSURING INCLUSIVENESS AND DIFFERENTIATION

The results of the online survey of Azerbaijani organisations suggest the most urgent and effective measure that the EU should support to enhance cooperation between Eastern partners whilst ensuring inclusiveness and differentiation in their relations with the EU is to **support and promote internal organisational reshuffles in order to establish special departments on regional cooperation and the EaP within the national public administration, and support the establishment of the position of EaP ambassador** (chosen by 37% of Azerbaijani respondents). On the basis of these results, the second most effective measure (26%) would be **investing in programmes creating a local layer of EaP-minded EaP citizens** (for example, expand the experience of the European School in Tbilisi, making it more inclusive).

INTRA-EAP COOPERATION

In your opinion, what would be the most urgent and effective measure the EU should adopt to support Intra-EaP cooperation? (you can choose only one)



Recommendations

Boosting intra-EaP cooperation

- Reduce the economic significance of national borders and urban-rural misbalance by adapting the lessons learnt from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to the Eastern Partnership region. The ERDF has been effective in strengthening economic and social cohesion in the EU by correcting imbalances between its regions, regardless of their geographical position. A similar model could be implemented to facilitate EU-EaP cooperation as well.
- Maintain the positive experience of the Eastern Partnership Territorial Cooperation programme (EaPTC), which implemented several projects last year, with the goal of deepening friendly relations between the youth of the bordering regions of Azerbaijan and Georgia.
- Involve the Visegrad4 civil society community in EaP regional activities to promote the exchange of best practices, particularly on the promotion of regional cooperation, cross-border initiatives and people-to-people contacts.
- Promote meetings between EaP and EU stakeholders in different areas, particularly the business community.
- Enhance cooperation between EaP countries' public institutions, SMEs and local authorities.
- Underpin the boost to intra-EaP cooperation by supporting democratisation and respect for human rights in all partner countries in order to achieve better synergy of individual countries' development trajectories.

Supporting regionalisation in selected areas

- Prioritise intra-EaP regional cooperation in the following areas:
 - Trade and transportation (as they can yield great benefit and are not politically sensitive);
 - Development of SMEs, social entrepreneurship, social security and labour rights, energy and non-oil sectors, light industry sector;
 - Cross-border cooperation;
 - Agriculture, the green economy, sustainable development, ICT, logistics;
 - Education, academic exchanges and training;
 - Fight against corruption.
- Prioritise the development of intra-regional cooperation in the South Caucasus region in the following sectors: tourism, road and rail infrastructure, cross-border trade, the creation of free border economic zones, energy security, and education.

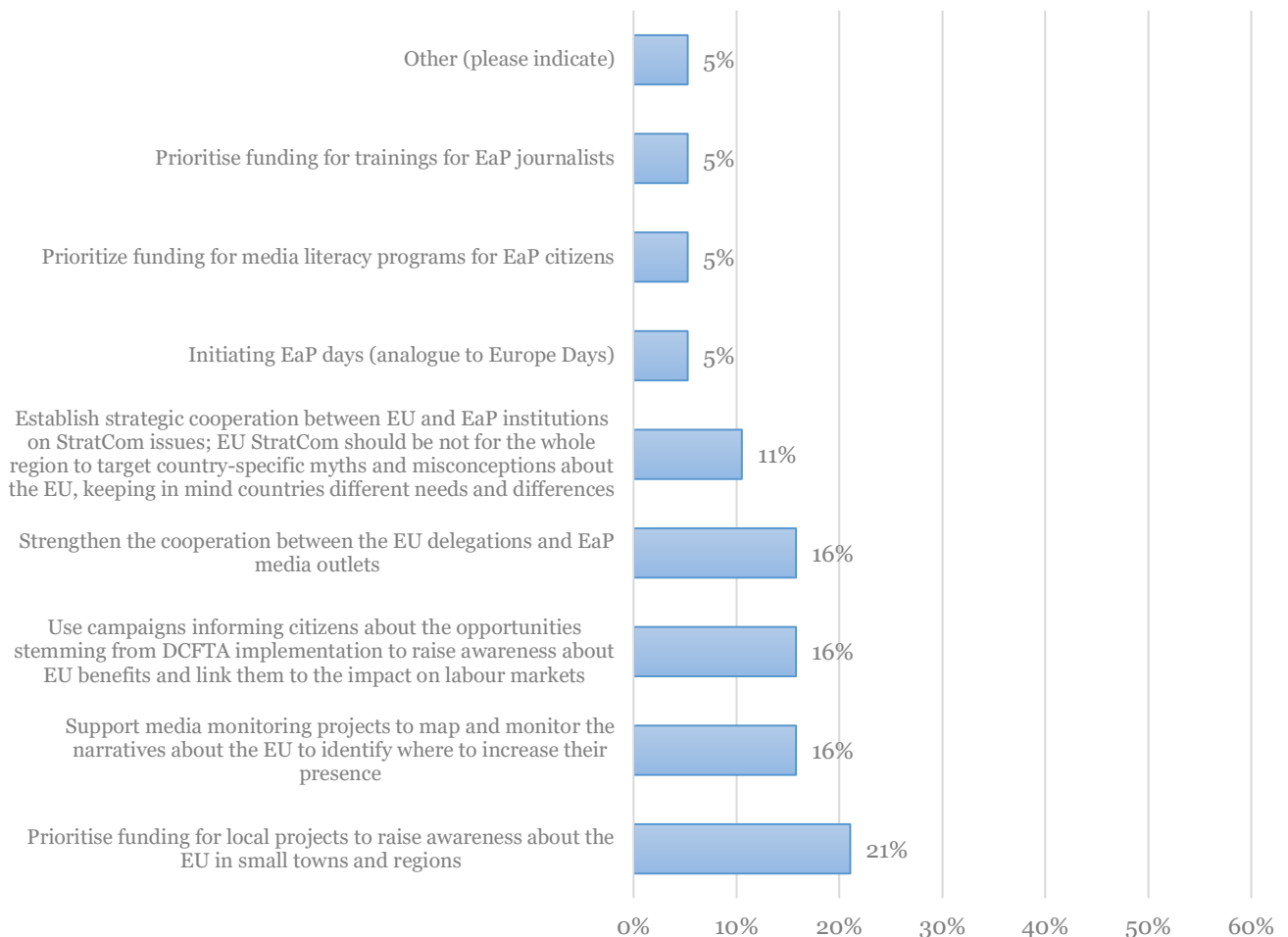


4. BOOSTING EU VISIBILITY IN THE EAP REGION

The results of the online survey of Azerbaijani organisations suggest the most urgent and effective measure that the EU should support to enhance the visibility of the EU in the EaP region is **prioritising funding for local projects raising awareness about the EU in small towns and regions and going beyond EU-minded cohorts** (chosen by 21% of Azerbaijani respondents).

EU VISIBILITY IN EAP COUNTRIES

In your opinion, what would be the most urgent and effective measure to enhance the visibility of the EU in the EaP region? (you can choose only one)



Recommendations

Working closely with bona fide civil society



- Support and cooperate with bona fide, pro-European CSOs and support the development of local networks, for example the EaP CSF Azerbaijani National Platform, based on the EaP CSF mission and code of ethical conduct.
- Facilitate cooperation between government and civil society on the implementation of the EU funded programmes.
- Centre public activities around people who are not normally part of political circles but at the same time succeeded through being beneficiaries of EU programmes.
- Expand financing to programmes disseminating information on (i) the goals and objectives of the EaP, (ii) European values, (iii) the prospects for rapprochement between EaP countries and the EU, (iv) the comprehensive assistance provided by the EU to EaP countries on their development in various fields, and (v) the success stories of other EaP countries. Promote alongside this the establishment of specialised NGOs in this field.

Investing in education

- Build and expand on the experience of the European School in Tbilisi, creating regional EaP schools in Baku and Ganja.
- Continue investing in civil society's educational programmes, including increasing the number of exchange programmes, study tours, festivals and trainings, as these are the most visible form of EU support in Azerbaijan and the easiest information to disseminate to all segments of society.

Working with media, particularly social media

- Work heavily with and pay particular attention to social media, as it remains a free platform to circulate correct information in the local language.
- Support local independent media, especially TV channels.
- Improve cooperation between the EU Delegation and national/local media outlets: meet regularly with local/national media to establish/improve connections, establish TV/radio programmes with representatives of EU delegations.
- Promote positive narratives about the EU via the media, funding training for EaP journalists on how to inform about the EU correctly and how to disseminate positive narratives in society.

Reaching out to people in the countryside

- Strengthen work with *bona fide* civil society organisations working outside the capital in order to reach more people who have lack of knowledge and information on EU values.
- Give more visibility to European values and way of life through education and mobility programmes reaching out to all segments of society – not only young people – facilitating people-to-people contacts in various regions of the country.
- Raise awareness and visibility about the beneficial work carried out by civil society organisations with the support of the EU.



5. STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

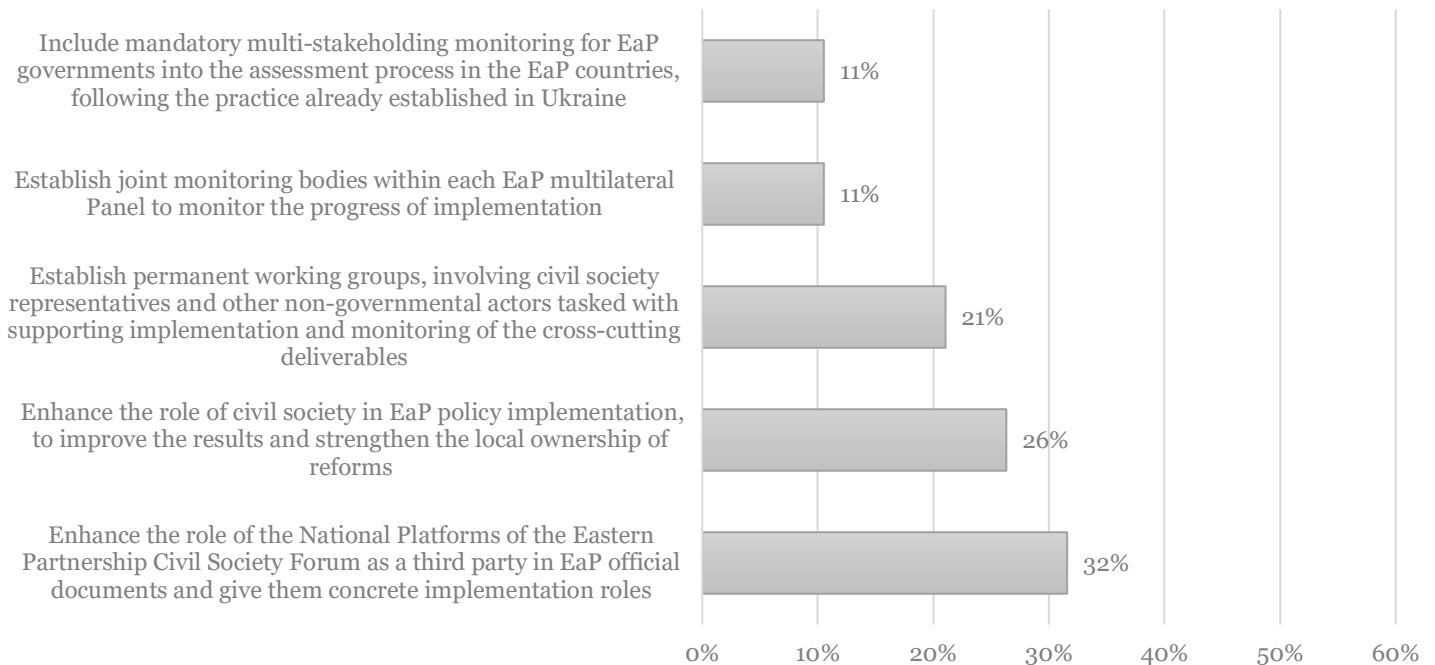
In Azerbaijan, CSOs' impact on shaping public policy remains limited. Changes to NGO legislation in 2013-14 have dramatically weakened *bona fide* civil society organisations and have almost destroyed the civil society sector. The legal framework for transparency of decision-making and consultation with civil society is not well established, and the secondary legislation necessary for good implementation has not been adopted for government agencies. The decision-making process at the parliamentary level is also a subject of criticism due to non-transparent legislative processes that include sporadic public hearings and consultations, limited access to information, changes in the legislative agenda without notification of civil society experts and other relevant stakeholders (or last-minute notification). The Parliament's rules of procedure await changes to incorporate transparency and CSO/citizen consultation for some time. This context makes it very difficult for CSOs to follow and shape the decision-making process consistently, and makes it easy for the government to adopt controversial legislative initiatives. Similarly, there are no precise procedures to ensure enforcement of transparency by local governments, and there is no monitoring mechanism for the enforcement of transparency legislation by these administrative units. The EU should closely monitor and support amendments to NGO legislation and the adoption of EU standards, as the biggest obstacle to the activities of civil society institutions in Azerbaijan remain the legislative changes of 2013-14.

Following the survey, 31.57% of Azerbaijani respondents pointed to ***enhance the role of the National Platforms of the EaP CSF as a third party in EaP official documents and give them concrete implementation roles*** as most effective measures to increase civil society involvement in the Eastern Partnership Policy. Secondly, 26% recommended ***enhancing the role of civil society in EaP policy implementation***, to improve results and strengthen the local ownership of reforms.



STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

What would be the most urgent and effective measure to increase civil society's involvement in the EaP policy? (you can choose only one)



Recommendations

Enabling environment for civil society

- Adopt a more principled position when it comes to supporting civil society in Azerbaijan, which has the worst situation of all EaP countries in this regard. Facilitation of an enabling environment for civil society via legislative changes should be a precondition to all other support to the country, like the expansion of economic assistance and the entry into local market of various EU goods and services (including raw materials).
- Allocate a significant financial envelope to Azerbaijan to rehabilitate the NGO sector after the 5+ years of crisis; support capacity building and advocacy initiatives to make civil society strong again to participate in policy dialogue.
- Hold the Azerbaijani government to account for the implementation of its commitments and monitor the process regularly.
- Increase the role of civil society in the design, implementation and monitoring of EaP policy and roadmaps.
- Select NGOs working under the EU umbrella based on strict criteria, with independence being the most important one.
- Invite more *bona fide* civil society organisations to EU events organised in the EU and in Azerbaijan. Support the involvement of *bona fide* civil society organisations, inviting



representatives of national platforms of the EaP CSF to official targeted events involving the participation of civil society.

- Continue to support CSOs' action in the areas of good governance, accountability and the rule of law, including monitoring public institutions, and transparency of decision making and policy implementation.
- More regular, structured and efficient multi-stakeholder dialogue, involving CSOs and local governments in every sector and policy/programming cycle.

Facilitating access to funding

- Tailor the EU's approach to Azerbaijan as much as possible, to counter the negative effects of the NGO legislation changes of 2014.
- Simplify the process of obtaining EU grants for Azerbaijani organisations, through regional calls and allocations via local offices.
- Provide organisational, technical, and financial support to civil society organisations so they can establish and maintain NGO houses (offices for joint use among NGOs).
- Incentivise the creation of private foundations supporting NGOs.
- Invest in programmes teaching civil society organisations how to self-fund and how to be financially sustainable through innovative resource mobilisation strategies.
- Increase the number of small grants for independent NGOs via regranting and EED programmes.
- Devise small grant programmes for individuals.
- Earmark funds for projects to be implemented in the regions.
- Introduce simplified visa procedures for civil society representatives.
- Make competitions available only to local NGOs, and allocate grants not only to individual civil society organisations but to NGOs coalitions as well.

Improving technical support

- Strengthen the internal capacities of CSOs through core support, including for national networks and regional organisations and platforms.
- Invest in capacity building training, seminars and workshops for civil society, to compensate the dramatic decrease in the number of capacity building programmes carried out by international organisations since 2014.
- Intensify institutional development programmes and initiatives targeted for the development of research-oriented independent CSOs.
- Foresee technical assistance to EU grant beneficiaries.



ANNEX – SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum’s contribution to DG NEAR’s Structured Consultation is a synthesis of a comprehensive process of internal consultation of the Forum’s membership base. The consultation was based on a methodology especially conceived to distill recommendations that would: (i) have a regional dimension while preserving country specificities; (ii) give a clear sense of prioritisation; (iii) be the result of a debate among civil society experts with complementary expertise on cross-sectoral areas; and (iv) ensure a high number of contributions to ensure the recommendations’ legitimacy, as well as country and expertise balance.

Within the elaborated methodology, three different but complementary mechanisms were used to gather the collective input of EaP CSF member CSOs from the six EaP countries and the EU:

- *six national in-person focus groups*, to debate and formulate recommendations featuring each EaP country’s national perspective on EaP and national priorities;
- *four online focus groups*, to formulate regional, thematic recommendations featuring experts with different profiles, but the same areas of specialism, from the EaP countries and the EU
- *one online survey*, intended as the most inclusive segment of the consultation, adding a quantitative element to the methodology that enabled the prioritisation of policy recommendations.

All three segments were conducted in October 2019 and involved over 200 experts.

The input from the segments was used to put together a synthesis report based on major common patterns that emerged across the focus groups and the online survey. The results of the survey and focus groups were also segmented by country and further distilled into dedicated country reports.

National in–person focus groups

The national focus groups were designed to capture in-country perspectives and country-specific recommendations. Six focus groups were conducted in October 2019 – one in each of the EaP states – with a total of 68 participants. Each discussion lasted for about four hours and was aimed at gathering the input of a group of EaP CSF member organisations, with balanced yet diverse expertise, on a set of questions formulated around the structure of DG NEAR’s Structured Consultation – i.e. four clusters of questions built around one scenario each. Each focus group followed the same protocol, built around four scenarios and containing a set of mandatory and optional questions that national FG facilitators could select from. Questions were formulated for national-level discussions to allow the aggregation of a balanced set of recommendations for the EU based on:

- Identifying current policy practices, actions and deliverables that the EU should retain in its post-2020 policy framework and ineffective or counter-productive practices which should be discontinued;
- Identifying new policy practices, actions and deliverables the EU could initiate;
- Testing policy ideas and actions already identified by the EaP CSF in previous rounds of internal consultations, or proposed as part of its existing written output (c.f. “Advancing Eastern Partnership: 23 Civil society ideas for the policy beyond 2020” policy paper);



- Identifying processes and policies that the EaP CSF should advocate further;
- Identifying umbrella recommendations as well as concrete policy actions that the EU could adopt.

Each focus group's facilitator prepared an analytical report of the discussions and submitted it to the methodology expert who used the six summary reports in the drafting of the synthesis report.

Online focus groups

Online focus groups captured thematic recommendations in a regional discussion, and were open to both EaP and EU civil society experts. Four online focus groups were conducted in October 2019. These addressed the following thematic areas:

- FG1: Economic development
- FG2: Human capital development
- FG3: Good governance, rule of law, and security
- FG4: Civil society engagement

Each focus group hosted 5-10 civil society experts – 24 in total – all of whom are active within the working groups of the EaP CSF with relevant professional background and expertise specific to the thematic area discussed. Each focus group hosted a one-hour discussion on a set of 7-9 questions, which addressed each thematic cluster from a regional perspective. Questions were formulated to allow aggregation of a set of recommendations at regional level for the EU, based on the same logic and criteria as the in-person focus groups elaborated above. Furthermore, questions sought to build upon and complement the key findings from the national focus groups with regional recommendations, as well as to triangulate the conclusions of overlapping discussions.

Four summary reports were produced as a result of the online focus groups, and used in the drafting of the final synthesis report. These included a general set of recommendations as well as one for each question asked in a summary form. When drafting the summary recommendations, the following questions were asked to guide the narrative: *What patterns emerge from the discussions? What are the common themes across the EaP region? What new policy actions could the EU pursue beyond 2020? Can these be generalised for the region based on the focus group discussions?*

Online survey

The online survey was conceived as the most inclusive segment of the consultation, adding a quantitative element to the methodology that enabled the prioritisation of policy recommendations. One general online questionnaire complemented the focus groups. The survey was offered in two languages, English and Russian, and it was made available to all six partner countries of the Eastern Partnership, as well as to EaP CSF member organisations based in EU member states. A total of 160 representatives of EaP CSF member organisations filled out the online questionnaire from 3rd to 14th October 2019.

The survey asked a mix of 15 open-ended and closed questions (+2 identification questions) grouped into six themes, following the structure of DG NEAR's Structured Consultation questionnaire:

- a. Economic development (Q1, Q2)
- b. Human capital development (Q3, Q4)
- c. Good governance, rule of law, and security (Q5, Q6, Q7)
- d. Intra-EaP cooperation (Q8, Q9)
- e. EU visibility in the EaP region (Q10, Q11)
- f. EU support to civil society (Q12, Q13, Q14)
- g. Other (Q15)

An online survey report was produced which synthesized the 160 responses of the EaP CSF member organisations into summaries of recommendations per question asked. All responses in English and Russian were individually analysed and grouped at the national level first. These were then clustered to identify regional and thematic patterns across the six EaP partner countries. The summaries of recommendations provided for each of the questions thus reflect common patterns identified across the region and are presented in the form of recommendations for the EU.



More Information

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) is a unique multi-layered regional civil society platform aimed at promoting European integration, facilitating reforms and democratic transformations in the six Eastern Partnership countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Serving as the civil society and people-to-people dimension of the Eastern Partnership, the EaP CSF strives to strengthen civil society in the region, boost pluralism in public discourse and policy making by promoting participatory democracy and fundamental freedoms. For more information, please visit the EaP CSF website at www.eap-csf.eu