

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Working Group 1

Online Meeting, 25-27 May 2021

Report

EaP CSF Working Group 1 met online between May 25 and May 27, 2021. Spread over eight online sessions, the meeting included a meet & greet session reporting on policy and EaP CSF updates, regranteeing and presenting project proposals, a session covering thematic updates from the WG1s of the six EaP countries, three policy debates on human rights and security, EaP policy as a priority for the EU and EaP governments and on continuation of the reform processes in the EaP countries. Selected EU stakeholders and external experts were invited to these debates to share their ideas and to discuss policy developments and the participation of civil society in addressing current challenges. Two experience sharing sessions were also part of the agenda, facilitating exchange among members on digital security and digital literacy. The meeting was open to all WG1 members and delegates. In total, 122 WG1 members and delegates registered for the online sessions of this WG1 meeting.

Meet & Greet Session – policy updates and funding opportunities

Tuesday 25 May, 10:00-10:45 CET

Power Point Presentation attached.

Opening remarks of the Meet & Greet session were delivered by WG1 coordinators Sofia Strive and Mikayel Hovhannisyan. Updates from EaP CSF were then presented, introducing important changes to the organisational operation and structure of the Forum. With the start of the implementation of the new 3-year grant, EaP CSF will focus on several new activities. The CSO academy will be developed, creating new digital solutions for capacity building activities across the policy silos, building as well on the previous capacity building work for members and coordinating with planned training activities at the NP level, as well as those provided by other projects (Technical assistance to CSOs in EaP). A new strategy for the Forum is also in development, taking into consideration recommendations and proposals on how to increase efficiency and optimise the work of the WGs.

The Annual Assembly (AA) will be held online between **November 29 - December 3, 2021**. Given the current sanitary situation and travel regulation being unpredictable, the AA will be held online.

Presenting updates from WG1, Sofia Strive began by covering future plans, including the AA meeting and WG1 advocacy priorities. The joint advocacy plan of WG1 is in development, although

the WG1 coordinators only received input from 3 of the national coordinators, and **further information from the other three countries would be most welcome.**

Re-granting was then briefly covered, with the new FSTP (Financial Support for Third Parties) EaP CSF re-granting to members for 2021-2023 explained and changes and similarities from previous re-granting highlighted. The maximum allocation remains at EUR 240,000 per year and the distribution is via three lots. Lot 1 - Monitoring EaP deliverables. Lot 2 - Addressing the Forum's strategic advocacy priorities. Lot 3 - Strengthening the linkage between EaP CSF's members. For Lot 1, there will be one selection procedure for 2021-2023 and one multi-annual grant. For Lot 2, two calls are envisaged in 2021 and 2022. For Lot 3, the call for 2020 is already closed and [four projects](#) have been selected for implementation. There will be a call open for Lot 3 in 2022 and 2023.

In 2021, WG1 will also benefit from the support of a consultant, who will assist the WG supporting the analytical work for EaP CSF representatives in the EaP architecture meetings, the preparation of WG meetings, the formulation of position papers and recommendations, and the identification of new formats and topics that WG members will find useful and interesting. The selection process for the WG1 consultant is currently underway.

After that, Kristina Pitalskaia, new Grants and Membership Manager at EaP CSF introduced herself to the participants. As Membership manager, Kristina will be in frequent contact with the members. Members themselves can reach her directly at kristina.pitalskaia@eap-csf.eu.

The structure of EaP architecture meetings, as well as the EaP CSF's unique position as sole civil society representative at the table, fulfilling the role of watchdog was explained. So far, no events have been organised under EaP Platform 1 this year. EaP CSF Advocacy Manager Vera Rihackova continued on from this introduction with specific advocacy updates on EaP policy processes, focusing on Human Rights Dialogues in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine, EURONEST, the Covid-19 papers series detailing the opportunities and policy solutions to be harnessed in the EaP region and Covid-19 vaccines for the EaP as part of #PrepareEaP4Health.

Looking ahead, the main EaP policy process milestones for later in 2021 will include: the publication of the EU Joint Staff Working Document (JSWD) on EaP implementation between 2021-2025 based on the Joint Communication "EaP policy beyond 2020 - Reinforcing Resilience", a discussion in the Foreign Affairs Council on EaP policy and meeting of the EaP Foreign Affairs Ministerial Meeting (27+6). This meeting will be preceded by the Senior Officials Meeting. The Steering Committee Members will be able to deliver speeches at the EaP Ministerial and SOM alike, delivering key messages from the Forum. The EaP Summit Declaration will be in the process of drafting from June up until the EaP Summit itself. In September a EURONEST resolution addressing the EaP Summit is expected and the Forum plans to contribute with its ideas. The EaP Summit itself will take place at the end of the year, most likely in the second half of December. EaP CSF plans to contribute to the debates and policy discussions around the EaP Summit during the online EaP CSF Annual Assembly.

In closing, both WG1 coordinators, Sofia Strive and Mikayel Hovhannisyanyan, encouraged active participation in the upcoming discussions highlighting common challenges and how best to address them.

Policy updates from EaP countries - good governance, human rights, rule of law, PAR, security, civil society environment, antidiscrimination policies

Tuesday 25 May, 14:00-15:15 CET

The session focused on discussing updates, trends and challenges in the areas pertinent to the work of WG1 in the six EaP countries based on the input from the representatives of the NPs WG1. Overall, the WG1 representatives identified serious challenges in the area of judiciary reform implementation in all EaP countries, as well as worsening situations in the human and civil rights areas with governments not adhering fully to their commitments often on the pretext of combating Covid-19 pandemic. The challenges to human security in relation to conflicts have also been raised repeatedly.

Ukraine - Iryna Sushko: There is a lot of interest and focus on judicial reform. In 2018, only 1.7% of citizens expressed trust in justice. The judicial reform was launched after the revolution of dignity but has not delivered the desired results. The supreme court has not been thoroughly reformed, 18% of its members are old judges and often do not meet integrity criteria. There were continuous appeals from the public and CSOs to improve the selection procedure and the evaluation of judges. Thanks to these activities, criterias have been specified and hundreds of candidates for the positions in the judiciary have been assessed against them for the first time. Despite some positive results, the judicial reform has failed overall and corruption continues to exist in this area. Failure to ensure transparent and accountable justice hinders the human rights situation as well as the credibility of the state, and jeopardises other reforms. The UNP has been focusing as well on monitoring law enforcement agencies reform. Although the law enforcement system has changed to guarantee the security of everyone, not all changes lead to success. Crime rates remain high and investigation procedures take a long time. Police work often focuses on the priorities of decision-makers and not the interests of society. The fight against corruption was made a priority, however, recently the progress of reforms in this area has slowed down. According to many civil society reports, civil society has struggled to protect and keep in place the legislative changes introduced in the post-revolutionary years. The authorities have been creating artificial problems and obstacles to full implementation of anti-corruption measures. There were several attempts at eliminating rules on financial monitoring of civil servants. There have often been technical problems in the functioning of the register of e-declaration. To tackle political corruption, the effective monitoring of party financing and ban on political advertising would have to be introduced. UNP WG1 also monitors the situation with rights in the area of mobility during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many restrictions were adopted and many problems highlighted the existing shortcomings in border management with Schengen countries. There are systemic problems like lack of infrastructure and communication among the responsible agencies. Beyond



these priorities, UNP WG1 also focused on advocating the launch of an effective system of vaccination against Covid-19 with the government.

Moldova - Lilia Carasciuc: Covid-19 slowed down the implementation of reforms and the current government, although not openly anti-European, is not very active. It has been a year of stagnation, as the elaboration/adoption/implementation of many strategic documents, action plans (NSIAC, justice sector reform, decentralisation, mass media development program, PAR) did not take place. In the anti-corruption domain, there was no court decision on corruption cases of public sensitivity. No assets have been recovered following the 1 Billion USD bank fraud and one of the proponents of this case, Ilan Shor, is running for office in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The implementation of GRECO recommendations has slowed down and there were two attempts to impede the activity of the National Integrity Agency. In recent months, there has been an increase in economic crimes with oligarchs using money for electoral campaigning. To improve the quality of electoral campaigns (particularly sanctioning for the use of administrative resources, regulation of hate speech, introduction of sanctions for violating electoral legislation) a draft law has been elaborated in June 2020, but still not adopted at the second reading, in spite of the fact that the Venice Commission and OSCE immediately came with an opinion on this draft law. The elections in Gagauzia have been cancelled under the pretext of Covid-19, in a major violation of the right to elect and be elected. The Moldovan legislation prohibiting propaganda still does not apply in Gagauzia. Moldova still has not ratified the Istanbul Convention on prevention of gender-based violence. Recently the socialist party made derogatory comments and a discriminatory declaration on LGBT, promising to apply criminal responsibility for disseminating information about LGBT, to amend the Constitution and include clauses prohibiting same sex marriage. There were multiple complaints about misuse of the Law on personal data protection to limit access to information by several mass media organisations. There is a need to improve the Law on access to information. Already in July 2018, a National Concept for Media development has been elaborated, but the Government has not done anything to elaborate a Programme based on this concept and only recently, with the support of members of the MNP, a commission for the elaboration of this Programme started its work. MNP WG1 supports the effort of civil society in Belarus to build a state of democracy and freedom. MNP conducted a flash mob in front of the Embassy of Belarus, calling on the EU countries to apply the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime on Alyaksandr Lukashenko as one of the main perpetrators of human rights violations in Belarus and proposed that the whole of WG1 support this call. MNP WG1 also published numerous public statements pointing at government efforts to change public policies in undesirable ways and strived to keep Moldova on its European path. The members of MNP WG1 contributed to the preparation of the EaP Index, elaborated a two-year advocacy strategy and organised numerous public events with EU and Moldovan stakeholders advocating for the improvement of the legal framework regulating such domains as anti-corruption, elections, mass media and state-owned enterprises. The 5th edition of the flagship publication of MNP WG1 - Monitoring Public Policies in Moldova, is in the pipeline.

Georgia - Tornike Zurabashvili: The overall situation in Georgia in the first months of 2021 was turbulent. The country has been in an inter-electoral period - between the Parliamentary

election of October 2020 and the Municipal elections of October 2021. The Parliamentary election was poorly conducted, with many violations in the pre-election period, including the misuse of administrative resources, and pressure/intimidation against voters. The vote tabulation phase was problematic as well, with many vote tally results failing to add up to the number of voters that had cast their votes. At the same time, the election administration managed to ensure that voters would be able to cast their votes despite the growing number of coronavirus infections. Still, the election was evaluated critically by domestic observers and the opposition political parties announced a boycott and did not take up their seats in the parliament. A lengthy state of political turmoil ensued. The situation was further exacerbated by the arrest of the leader of the largest opposition party, UNM, Nika Melia in February 2021. On the positive side, the involvement of the EU in quelling the political crisis that followed these processes was successful and led to an agreement between the government and opposition on numerous key issues of future development, including the continuation of the judiciary and electoral reforms, and amnesty for the arrested leaders of the opposition and independent mass media owners. The agreement also saw the end of the parliamentary boycott. In terms of human rights developments, locals living on the Tbilisi-administered sides of the occupation lines with Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and Abkhazia were still being detained in high numbers, while Georgian inhabitants living in the two regions could not freely commute to Georgia proper for education, healthcare, business or other purposes due to unjustified Covid-19 restrictions.

Azerbaijan - Ziya Guliyev: In the area of good governance, the government introduced some legislative changes and new tools to improve the performance of the public administration. There is no headway on civil society legislation. A new Agency for state support of NGOs was established by the order of the president on the basis of the existing Council of State support to NGOs. The agency will be providing grants and capacity building and can solicit funding from other sources than the state's. The human rights challenges are persistent, including the political prisoners and difficult situation of journalists and bloggers from independent media. An incentive to improve the situation in the field of human rights and civil society environment is the Open Government Partnership. Azerbaijan is a member of this international initiative but its action plan was suspended due to problems related to CSO legislation. Several points concerning the CSO legislation were outlined in the action plan and should be implemented by the end of the year in order for the Azerbaijani government to restore its membership.

Armenia - Syuzanna Soghomonyan: CEPA entered into force on March 1 and a civil society platform should be formed with EESC representatives representing the EU side. Last year the AMNP drafted the procedure for the formation of the Armenian side of this civil society platform. The draft was widely discussed with all stakeholders and included most of the recommendations provided during the discussion. The procedure was approved in the recent AMNP Assembly, which was held on 12 May. It is envisaged that in upcoming weeks that procedure of formation of the platform will start. AMNP strategy for 2021-2022 was drafted and discussed with the members of AMNP. The areas of human rights, security, justice and judiciary, anti-corruption and good governance are in the spotlight of the Strategy. The advocacy activities of the AMNP WG1 were developed and discussed with both WG1 coordinators and national coordinators. The most

important advocacy activities will be included in the roadmap and campaign towards the EaP Summit. The CSOs coalition within AMNP also contributed to the EU Multi-Annual Indicative Programming (MIP) 2021-2027 for the sector of accountable institutions, the rule of law, and security. A number of issues under these sectors were raised and provided to the EU. AMNP WG1 has been active in monitoring the selection and appointment of the judges to the Supreme and Constitutional Courts. As a result of the monitoring, a statement criticising the shortcomings of the current practice was published on behalf of the AMNP. Further monitoring included the National Strategy on Human Rights and its Action Plan and was carried out by the Armenian Lawyers' Association, member of AMNP WG1 and published in November 2020. As a result of the monitoring, the Ministry of Justice agreed to amend the National Strategy and to define new priorities after the adverse consequences and impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh war and Covid-19 pandemic. However, no progress was recorded since then, which is very concerning. The ideas and activities were collected from the AMNP WG 1 members to draft the WG 1 Action Plan. The draft is currently in the stage of finalization. A fact-finding report on human rights violations during the Nagorno-Karabakh war was developed. Several members of the AMNP WG1 have significantly contributed to the draft. The draft report is currently in the process of finalisation and will be published soon on behalf of the member organisations of the AMNP WG1. The major challenges for the country are in the area of human rights and security; the situation has become alarming following the conflict. There are more than 200 POWs who are considered hostages and are being used as a bargaining chip against Armenia. Despite the decisions of ECHR, Azerbaijan has refused to provide information on the POWs and release them. In its recent resolution dated May 20, the European Parliament also called on the Azerbaijani government to fully cooperate with the ECHR and provide an exhaustive list of POWs and information on their conditions of detention and state of health. The European Parliament also expressed deep concern about the degrading conditions, the inhuman treatment and torture of many Armenian hostages by the Azerbaijani authorities. Human rights and security, including physical security and right to life are a number one priority. As a result of the war, many people have become internally displaced and disabled. Furthermore, the derogatory attitude towards the Armenian people is embodied by the "Trophy Park" recently opened in Baku where Armenian military equipment is displayed as well as wax mannequins of dying Armenian soldiers. The European Parliament and CoE Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concerns over the inauguration of this park. The AMNP WG1 also concludes that the anti-corruption and judicial reforms in the country have failed. One of the reasons is the lack of a truly independent anti-corruption body, because the members of the Corruption Prevention Commission were appointed by political agreements, and there are a number of unsolved issues in the judiciary concerning its independence and integrity. Unfortunately the results of sectoral projects funded by various donors are not visible and can hardly be verified. AMNP WG1 has been also critical about the approach to distribution of the EU funding via partner organisations providing further regranting. This practice has established a culture of several donor darlings, destabilising the situation in the civil society sector and creating several competing networks.

Belarus - Volha Smolianko: The situation in the country is critical, the remaining civil society organisations are trying to support individual people targeted by the regime. There are immense

problems with human rights violations and international support is very important. BNP is working on international advocacy to maintain Belarus on the agenda of international fora and stakeholders. It is necessary to understand the current situation in Belarus and keep raising the internal developments in Belarus and the situation of Belarusian CSOs via all channels of the Forum, including the Secretariat. Support from other countries in the region is also needed. Today, 420 people are being considered political prisoners, including 15 journalists, and more are arrested every day. According to the BNP assessment, more than 1000 people are currently detained in relation to protests. Freedom of assembly and association ceased to exist in Belarus. People are detained on absurd pretexts. The penitentiary system is also a matter of grave concern. It is closed to visitors and there has been a stable increase in Covid-19 cases in prisons. The detainees face torture, physical pain and are left without any medical help. They also have trouble reaching their lawyers who were in many cases stripped of their license. The conversations between lawyers and their clients were often recorded. Many bloggers and activists are in prison but also civil society organisations often undergo checks and controls, many have already relocated abroad. As for the most recent developments, the major independent news outlet Tut.by was destroyed and the story of the commercial plane forced to land in order for the regime to be able to arrest blogger Raman Pratasevich is very well known and EaP CSF issued a [statement](#) on this issue.

Policy debate with external stakeholders 1 - Human rights and security - major challenges in the EaP region and prognosis for future development

Wednesday 26 May, 09:00-09:50 CET

The moderator, **Mikayel Hovhannisyan**, opened the session by introducing the format of the three connected policy debates. The first debate is dedicated to the subject of human rights and security. Formulating talking points was difficult as the situation is quite literally changing every single day, the airliner diversion in Belarus being a prime example of this turbulence.

Mathieu Bousquet, Head of Unit at DG NEAR underlined that by 2024, the EU must have a stronger geopolitical role. The objective is clearly to act in solidarity with the Eastern Partnership countries and particularly their citizens as there are numerous human security related challenges including Eastern Ukraine, Belarus, Nagorno-Karabakh, occupied/breakaway parts of Georgia and so on. Covid-19 has aggravated the already complex problems at play. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has shaken the entire South Caucasus region, the medium-long term effects of this particularly deadly flare up are yet to be seen or understood. The EU has already provided an initial 7 million EUR in humanitarian assistance and an additional 10 million EUR has been allocated to help with any further emergency situation. Rebuilding homes and lives will take time, but confidence building will take much longer and it is confidence building that is essential to a lasting peace. Security is multi-faceted, there are a range of challenges both the EU and EaP countries are facing, there is a track record of joint projects and programmes, cyber-security, energy security, socioeconomic security, disinformation etc. Security is strongly interlinked with

areas in which there has been a high level of cooperation in the past, from rule of law to democratic principles and human rights and also socioeconomic development. From the human security perspective, this includes protecting people from critical and pervasive threats and situations. In Belarus, the EU was quick to react to the fraudulent Presidential elections in 2020 and supported Belarusian citizens and free media. Medical, psychological and legal support was mobilised by the EU to help the people of Belarus affected by torture and ill-treatment; journalists and digital activists were given support to leave Belarus if they so desired. Engagement with people on the ground was stepped up and the EU will continue to sustain activism and for the coming academic year, support will be provided to students and academics to continue their studies. **A strong and independent civil society will continue to be critical in ensuring effective reforms, accountability and advancing human rights and the EU will keep supporting civil society.** The pandemic has impacted gender equality across the globe and women's economic security has been hit hard, domestic violence has increased. It has been estimated that the pandemic could set back gender equality by 15 years in the EaP. It is very important that we stay on course, building a resilient agenda together for the benefit of the people.

Thomas de Waal, Senior Fellow at Carnegie Europe, began by talking about the growth of the EU presence in all 6 EaP countries. However, in terms of security, the EU is still struggling to find a role in the region. In tackling the critical situation 15 years ago, the EU was perhaps stronger in this regard than it is now. **In face of an increasingly assertive Russia, there should perhaps have been a specific conflict dimension to the EaP policy.** There is a tendency in the EU to believe that the conflicts in the EaP are the responsibility of the EUSR and not a priority for the EU whereas 15 years ago conflict was more holistically connected to other elements of the EU foreign policy. When it comes to Nagorno-Karabakh, the EU has always had to navigate a difficult situation as France is one of the formal three mediators of the OSCE Minsk Group which gave the EU an indirect role in these conflicts. The EU has therefore only ever been indirectly involved in conflict mediation for Nagorno-Karabakh, never stepping foot in the region itself. The EU has concentrated on the civil society aspect of the conflict but unfortunately civil society has been marginalised in this arena. When the conflict heated up again in December, the EU was a rather marginal actor in calling for a ceasefire and other measures. This was ultimately a unilateral effort by the one external actor that wanted to intervene and shape the conflict, Russia, and that is a defeat for multilateral diplomacy. The EU could play a significant role in the humanitarian aspect if the countries in question allow access to Nagorno-Karabakh, there is a lot of reconstruction and other humanitarian work that needs to be done in this region which the EU could play a big part in. In Ukraine, the Normandy format is at play but the EU can be doing more on the ground with civil society groups and reconciling peoples. In Transnistria, the traditional industrial heartland of Moldova the EU has done well, including the region in Moldova's DCFTA, which allows Transnistrian companies to trade with the EU, an example of effective diplomacy, which should be replicated elsewhere.

Andrei Yahorau, Eurobelarus and Belarusian National Platform, continued with an update on Belarus. The situation in Belarus in terms of human rights, is catastrophic. There are 400 political prisoners, twice as many people generally imprisoned, because of their civic stance and political



activism. More than 2000 criminal cases have been opened against activists and over the last few weeks as the largest independent media organisation in Belarus was dismantled and a political prisoner died under suspicious circumstances. Administrative arrests have encompassed over 30,000 people, torture is being used against political prisoners, it's a conveyor belt that is being used very effectively against political prisoners. The entire judiciary and law enforcement agencies are all complicit in the operation of this conveyor belt. Then there is the act of air piracy from a few days ago to arrest an opposition blogger. This is a violation of international law. We have had repression in Belarus for many years but now the regime has fallen foul of international law, actions of this kind jeopardise international security and show the vulnerability of international air traffic regulation and the insufficient ability of the international security architecture to respond to such incidents when human rights are being violated in sovereign countries and then it spills over to the rest of Europe. In 2020, Belarus used a whole range of measures against its citizens, the EU tried to use the whole toolkit against the government of Belarus. The Moscow mechanism of the OSCE is going to be used against Belarus, special investigations are going to be started, the international and EU sanctions against the regime and its henchmen are being imposed. There has been a very strong solidarity reaction which is perhaps the most significant reaction in terms of supporting people and independent media in Belarus. These tools critically do not have an impact on the human rights violations in Belarus, the whole country is being held hostage of this brutal regime. EaP policy has to face up to the lack of policies and preceding reaction to such circumstances. In the previous crisis in 2015 the release of political prisoners led the EU to pay a lot of attention to trying to build bridges with the government. Subsequently, in order to increase the level of knowledge, to improve the system, mostly aimed at cooperation with the Lukashenko regime, the country was seen as an 'island of stability'. **The EU institutions were not preparing for a new crisis with the regime, no thought was given to preparedness for this eventuality.**

In a follow-up to speakers' interventions, the moderator asked **what measures should be taken to better protect citizens**. According to **Mathieu Bousquet**, the situation is indeed challenging and has clearly worsened in terms of security. The EU didn't expect it. For the first time ever, the European Commission has prepared a new programme called **#EU4Dialogue**, the first programme that will attempt to change the narrative of the conflict, namely by investing in the fight against disinformation, supporting civil society and independent media, and investing in youth. These conflicts go a long way back, but there is a need to think about investing in the future. **Thomas de Waal** added that context is important and the ability of **dialogue to transform a conflict is much greater in an open society**. It will be a big challenge in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In Abkhazia the challenge may not be as difficult, as there seems to be a greater desire for dialogue and a bigger potential role for the EU. Strategic patience is required to tackle these conflicts, everyone apart from Russia is currently marginalised and there will be a huge bill for the damage caused. The EU can definitely make an offer here as many nations won't have the money or will to do it, but it must come with a peace deal for the territories involved. In terms of developments in Belarus, **Andrei Yahorau** was asked about his expectations. Unfortunately, the **soft authoritarian regime has been changed to a real authoritarian dictatorship**. When dealing with soft authoritarian regimes one must

remember that hard authoritarian regimes are an eventuality. Long term structures that would create the sustainability of society must be thought of. The solidarity of civil society in EaP countries should be a long-term strategy and it should not depend on how the regime is behaving. It should span careers, a plan for 15, maybe 20 years and it requires a completely new approach on the EU side to the EaP policy.

Policy debate with external stakeholders 2 - How to strengthen the EaP as a priority in policy and political agendas of the EaP and EU decisionmakers?

Wednesday 26 May, 10:00-10:55 CET

The moderator, **Hanna Shelest**, opened the debate following up on the previous discussion.

According to **Iulian Groza**, Executive Director IPRE Moldova, every country of the EaP is today much closer to the EU, although this fact is more pronounced for the associated countries. However, the political and geopolitical situation remains a challenge, most notably because of Russian threats to security. In addition, political crises conjoined with the impact of the pandemic have triggered or aggravated systemic issues in the region. Looking to the future, the new EaP should have a stronger focus on democracy and resilience, and bring aspiring countries much closer. To that end, an EaP-EU strategic dialogue that would reflect the higher geopolitical ambitions of the EU is very much needed. In the meantime, it is necessary to find ways to address structural issues - vaccination against Covid-19 (EUROVAX), freedom of movement of citizens in the post-pandemic situation, economic recovery including the opportunities and funding of infrastructure projects and long-term development. The EaP countries also have to continue the reform agenda on issues like human rights, corruption and justice reform, and **these reforms have to be properly monitored and there have to be effective instruments to discourage abuses by governments**. The reform of the regional approach is crucial, there has to be a more ambitious partnership for AA/DCFTA countries within the EaP policy. Cooperation with other EaP countries should be also strengthened in order to facilitate reform and resilience.

Sweden was one of the EU countries that initiated the EaP 11 years ago. Is this project up to original expectations and still attractive to the partners, and how it should be eventually transformed? In response to the moderator, **Anna Westerholm**, EaP Ambassador, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, outlined that many policy objectives have been reached. EaP is a policy which brings us together, not a mere project. The EU member states and EaP countries have agreed on pursuing the goals of this policy together. At the same time, many achievements were taken for granted and we have to have a forward looking agenda, based on the experiences and lessons learned. The perspective has changed in time and the region and partner countries are now perceived in a European perspective. In the same vein, the perspective on engagement with civil society has changed too. Civil society is considered not only as a watchdog but as an actor providing expertise for the policy making and implementation processes. Looking forward towards the Summit, which is going to be an important milestone, the EaP has to change and be up to the challenges. We need to rethink our response to the pandemic and post-pandemic



situation, including the Investment plan which is being brought forward by the European Commission in order to support the economic recovery of the region. There is a need to include the environmental aspects and digitalisation into the post-pandemic recovery - namely from the Swedish perspective, **the recovery should be inclusive, sustainable and green.** It should be designed as a plan that will profoundly change the region in the long term. It is important not to forget that our approach has to be value-based: democracy, human rights, free media and an enabling environment for civil society have to be the basis of our relations in the future.

The six EaP countries have been developing their EU aspirations to various extents. The AA/DCFTA countries have signalled for a long time that they are interested in deeper cooperation and voiced concerns the EU would substitute EaP policy for European integration. **Petra Gombalova Kyslingerova**, Head of Division, EEAS, underlined the necessity to distinguish between the EaP policy and EU enlargement policy. The EaP countries have achieved a lot of progress and there is scope for closer cooperation should the partner countries wish for it. To have a stronger partnership, we are building an agenda based on [the Communication](#) published last year, specifying further concrete deliverables and targets. We will continue working with partners to implement sustainable reforms and achieve key political goals with the Investment plan and flagship initiatives in place. Today we need to prepare the EaP for the 21st century: for green and digital transformation, and to build resilience. The basis of this relationship will continue to be values. The EaP will remain an inclusive framework but we value differentiation. We acknowledge EU aspirations and ambitions of AA/DCFTAs partners, it's their free choice. The memorandum of understanding prepared by Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine was taken note of. Each EaP Summit was not conducted in an easy situation and circumstances, and it is now the case more than ever. We need to reaffirm our commitment to the EaP and build a positive narrative coming from the summit. **There is a lot of pressure on the region and we need to make sure the EaP is still relevant and delivers concrete results. The key theme of the summit follows the 3R: recovery, resilience, reforms but key choices will be done by partners.**

Elzbieta Kaca, Analyst, Polish Institute of International Affairs, continued by reminding the fact that the basic problem for the ambitious EaP development is the Russian factor. It is very difficult in the current context to strengthen the EaP policy. Before the EaP Summit, several priorities have to be in focus: the main priority is countering the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a need for more vaccines and support of vaccination infrastructure. Within the Investment plan, we should not repeat some of the previous mistakes and tailor the policies as much as possible for the needs of individual countries. Another priority should be the focus on social issues. The EaP CSF should advise on these priorities. **There is a need for more resilience from external threats, the EaP countries need help countering energy dependence, disinformation, or cyberthreats with concrete initiatives.** The inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine in PESCO projects related to cybersecurity could be one such step. The budget of EU Stratcom East should be increased and there should be further support for cooperation at social media platforms and among the EaP countries' fact checkers. AA/DCFTA countries should be granted gradual access to the EU single market including inclusion in the single payment area, and involvement in the work of the EU agencies, for example in the health sector. The aspirations

of the three frontrunners have to be acknowledged. The associated countries need to be more active before the EaP Summit with joint statements. In order to increase ownership and buy-in, the EaP countries could be responsible for organising ministerial meetings or be invited to the meetings of COEST (EU Council Working Party on Eastern Europe and Central Asia). Before the EaP Summit, we need successes in countering corruption and building an independent judiciary sector in the EaP countries (in Georgia, for example) as a proof of EaP policy credibility.

In the follow-up to the initial interventions and Q&A part, the issue of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan was brought up from the perspective of human security in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, the situation of POWs and the economic repercussions of the conflict. Beyond the symbolic gestures, what else can be done to resolve this difficult situation? In her response, **Petra Gombalova Kyslingerova** underlined a need for a stable South Caucasus and the implementation of a ceasefire. The EaP policy is not designed as a conflict resolution mechanism but a lot can be done within its framework, including ministerial meetings etc. **Anna Westerholm** added that the EU and the EU member states are providing a lot of humanitarian assistance already and are also supporting bilaterally the CSOs working on the ground.

Another question raised the issue of correlation between human rights challenges and conflict zones. By adding these topics to the EaP agenda, the demands for respect of human rights will not apply only for governmental controlled territories but also for breakaway regions. In her response, **Petra Gombalova Kyslingerova** underlined that human rights are the fundamental basis of the EaP multilateral policy and of the bilateral relations with the EaP countries, but once again stressed that the EaP policy is not a conflict resolution mechanism. **Elzabietta Kaca** added that the EU global sanctions regime on human rights is a new instrument and can be used for human rights violations in conflict zones like Donbass, Transnistria etc. CSOs can be effectively advocating for such sanctions when there is proof of these violations.

Another question inquired as to the main issues that need to be addressed for effective resilience building. **Iulian Groza** explained that strengthening resilience echoes the specificities of the region. There is a need for a more tailored and ambitious approach. Security is the most basic aspect of resilience. Second is the democratic aspect of societies. They are exposed to divisive agendas, like in Moldova, where hate speech is present. There is a need to understand these messages, secure the information space, develop civic participation and democratic institutions, and make them resilient from kleptocrats and oligarchs. It is also necessary to look into how resilience can be strengthened through education and interconnectedness. The strategic connectivity projects should link even more the partner countries to the EU space in terms of both infrastructure and values. **Anna Westerholm** continued by saying that resilience allows for work with the concept of differentiation to its full extent. Resilience is context-specific and changes over time and countries. First priority is a matter of public trust: vibrant civil society is important, but also education, transparency and accountability. People need to trust their governments. Without trust, they are more susceptible to manipulation and pressure. Resilience has to be done bottom up, people know their environments. It also gives an opportunity to work on security in the broadest sense: institutions, climate change, health, energy, civil society. There

is a member states' non-paper on resilience that could be interesting for the audience. **Petra Gombalova Kyslingerova** added that resilience is the ability to cope under pressure and withstand it. Number one tool is stronger governance and development of democratic institutions. **Elzbieta Kaca** outlined that to strengthen resilience, the EU should be more consistent with conditionality across all policy areas.

Mikayel Hovhannisyan provided a link and feedback from the previous policy debate. He elaborated on the issue of human rights and security and mentioned several ideas that were formulated on the necessity for the EU to develop mechanisms to allow for flexible response and change of working methods in relation to the fast developments in the region. The only response to the quickly changing environment is to have a wide arsenal of tools. In the case of Belarus or the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, such a response is very much needed. These tools should be complemented by long term strategic processes based on the assessment of potential of each EaP country, focusing for example on youth, media or other areas.

Policy Debate with External Stakeholders 3 - Business as usual - how to continue reform processes in the EaP countries?

Wednesday 26 May, 11:05-12:00 CET

The moderator, Antonella Valmorbidia, opened the session.

Shahla Ismayil, Chairwoman of the Women's Association for Rational Development and EaP CSF SC Member, stated that good governance and stability are two key entry points for the development and further reform of the EaP countries. There are two key words which are instrumental for any reform in the EaP, the first is governance, good governance is the foundation of everything. The second is stability which ensures that reforms can take hold. In Azerbaijan, stability is also very related to good governance and an extension can be made to political, economic, environmental and other forms of stability. Civil society in Azerbaijan has been in damage control mode since the 2014 crackdown and its advocacy potential has been severely limited. This crackdown goes beyond legislative measures and has affected everything, organisational capacity, infrastructure, financial viability, public image as well as the aforementioned advocacy potential. As such, it is hardly possible to suggest that there has been a favourable environment for reform in Azerbaijan. The effects of this crackdown on civil society are represented at all levels of government, limiting participation, accountability, inclusion and transparency. However, the Covid-19 pandemic and recent escalation of the conflict with Armenia are change contexts that present an opportunity to introduce positive reforms but only on the condition that there is good will and a political will to do so. A big question mark remains as to whether internal and external stakeholders will use these opportunities to push for change, not just in Azerbaijan but also in other EaP countries.



Michael Emerson, Associated Senior Research Fellow at CEPS, mentioned the provocative nature of the session title, highlighting that the current period is anything but 'business as usual'. The schism within the EaP between the three countries with AA/DCFTAs and the three without is deeper than ever. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have even semi-institutionalised themselves as the 'Association Three' and are working together to develop common positions. Meanwhile, Belarus is no longer a partner in any meaningful sense of the word, apart from in the context of the EaP CSF. The aim is simply to keep civil society alive in Belarus and support courageous colleagues there who continue to speak out against the government. In Azerbaijan the situation is similar and there is no genuine interest in European values on the side of the government. Again, the priority is simply to support civil society in the face of repeated crackdowns on their activities. Armenia is in a state of trauma and heightened geopolitical and security dependence on Russia, it is more of an intermediate case vis-a-vis the position of civil society in the country but still the situation in the country is very unsettled. The 'Association Three' wish to enhance their own reform agendas and achieve deeper integration with the EU, the question is how best to go about it. The trio should stake-out a common position in substance to which the EU should then respond. European Council President Charles Michel has helped rescue Georgian democracy which is really good news and a new meeting with the leadership of the trio is planned, this could turn out to be an important deepening of their political relationship with the EU. Moldova has a new pro-reform, pro-EU President which is very good news for reformed and development in the country and indeed other positive developments may become possible after parliamentary elections in July. In Ukraine, the picture is more uncertain and the path has been bumpy but this is a classic case of a country looking for stronger support and conditionality which the EU can provide. On what the 'Association Three' should actually do and what the EU should do, CEPS has published a [report](#) comparing the situation of candidate and associated countries and advocating the content and structure for a new enhanced momentum of integration for these three countries, divided into three main chapters - functional, financial, and institutional. Functional is the most susceptible to incremental development to what is already happening, ergo it should be possible for the three countries to associate with initiatives like the green deal, digital union and health union that are already in motion. In financial aspects of the EaP policy, more explicit operability should be introduced and the countries should be formally rated, creating a basis for more objective and rigorous assessment on the direction of funding. Institutionally, the EU should allow for more participation of the associated countries representatives in its institutions and agencies. In a nutshell, it is possible to set out a very important agenda that would constitute a step-change for the three AA/DCFTA countries. Nowhere else are the neighbouring countries asking to come closer to the EU so enthusiastically, the EU should be prepared to respond to some new ambitious initiative that the trio themselves may formulate.

Henrik Norberg, Deputy Director, Head of Division for Reform Support at the Department for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, continued on by stating that Sweden is one of the largest donors to the EaP countries and one of the longest standing partners and supporters of reform in the region since these countries gained independence. Roughly 600 million EUR will be provided for the implementation of the new Swedish strategy for the region. The main aim is to support the countries' own reform agendas, reform support

needs to be based on demand, rather than supply. The general framework is that the best vehicle for reform in the region is continued integration, approximation and cooperation with the EU. Moving down the ladder, the actual areas of support are anything but 'business as usual' though it is hard to say when it was ever 'business as usual'. However, even in tumultuous times, Swedish reform support will be very consistent, focusing on three main priority areas, economic development, democracy and human rights and environment and climate. In the future there will also be the addition of some focus on the conflict dimension. When it comes to the immediate and long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, we need to be ready to adapt our support to areas that may have been affected in different, less obvious ways. In supporting reforms, we need to learn from each other, and orchestrate broad support by improving people-to-people contacts, which has the added benefit of tackling disinformation. Values matter, Sweden will continue to base reform support on the values the country believes in. Swedish support to civil society will continue and it will pay attention to find new ways to cooperate with civil society under threat in challenging environments.

In the follow-up Q&A part, the issue of European values mainstreaming within the EaP reform process was discussed. **Michael Emerson** underlined that values are the basis of the EU's operations in the region. The three AA/DCFTA countries wish to improve their democracies and such a process is underway, unlike in the authoritarian regimes. **Shahla Ismayil** discussed what is a red line for different countries. The universal respect for human rights and freedoms must be the basis no matter what the situation. In Azerbaijan there is not just a Covid-19 crisis, but also a post-war crisis, instability, and lack of predictability. This special context can be seized for improving the human rights situation. It is incredibly difficult for civil society to remain active and outspoken in the country. The Open Government Partnership process related to the action plan on implementation, and reinstating the full membership of Azerbaijan if the government complies with conditions in the area of enabling environment for civil society is another opportunity.

Members' experience sharing session 1 - Digital security

Thursday 27 May, 09:15-10:00 CET

Power Point Presentation attached.

Digital security is paramount to the work of civil society, especially during the enhanced online presence in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. **Marcin de Kaminski**, Security and Innovation Director, Civil Rights Defenders, focused on sharing his knowledge and recommendations on how to secure baseline digital security. Civil society difficulties in the digital space that could be mitigated via peer-to-peer experience sharing. He focused on 4 areas: passwords and password management, mobile devices and how to handle them, security on online platforms, and email security. Further reading and assistance was offered to interested members and contact details and key information can be found in the attached PPT.

Members' experience sharing session 2 - Digital literacy

Thursday 27 May, 10:15-11:00 CET

Volodymyr Yermolenko, Director of Analytics at Internews Ukraine introduced the experience exchange session by underlining the need to think in terms of new trends and the wider region in the field of digital literacy and countering disinformation. Generally, it is a challenge to persuade people they are not digitally literate. Independent judgement capabilities are considered very high by the consumers in Ukraine and very likely in other EaP countries. There is a high confidence to take judgement but at the same time citizens often think they cannot change anything and lack agency. This feeling is supported by specific narratives coming from Russia to undermine civic activism. The internet has increased the level of consumption of information and served as a key source to organise protests in Belarus. Attacks on online media (Tut.by) only prove the authoritarian regimes recognise the internet as a source of threat. As long as the internet is a good mobilisation tool but it is not as good for creating solidarity. Social media is becoming a major tool of information warfare. It is difficult to fight against this with fact checking, because often only rumours circulate on social media and it is a one-way communication. One of the solutions is that we should not be tackling the malign information but looking at how the internet can unite and engage people who would become key co-creators and co-funders.

Closing session

Thursday 27 May, 11:15-11:45 CET

During the closing session, WG1 Coordinators **Sofia Strive** and **Mikayel Hovhannisyan**, summarised the main takeaways from the sessions and stressed how closely the topics that were discussed during the policy debates are interconnected. Recommendations and suggestions on advocacy and capacity building are to be shared with WG1 NP coordinators. As for next steps, the two sessions dedicated to the WG1 work at the Annual Assembly will be prepared based on the input from members gathered via the post WG1 meeting survey. The WG1 meeting was also designed to understand if there is a possibility to communicate on the crisis points, including the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, within the Forum and the WG1 and how to cooperate further. Smaller scale meetings on specific topics can be organised for interested members on the way towards the Annual Assembly.