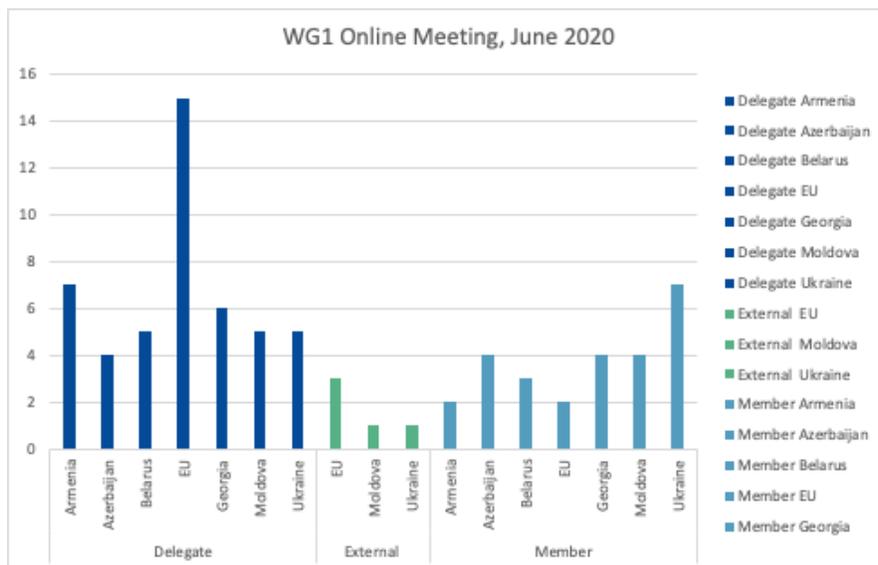


Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Working Group 1

Online Meeting, 8-12 June 2020

Meeting Report

This year EaP CSF Working Group 1 met in an online format due to circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nine online sessions were organised and took place between 8 and 12 June, and these all proved that the impossibility to meet in person can bring about new opportunities. The online policy debates on specific topics and the meeting with EU stakeholders were open to all WG1 members. Out of 78 attendees, 47 were current delegates, 26 members and 5 external guests. The chart below shows the distribution of these attendees between the 6 EaP countries and EU member states.



Meet & Greet sessions

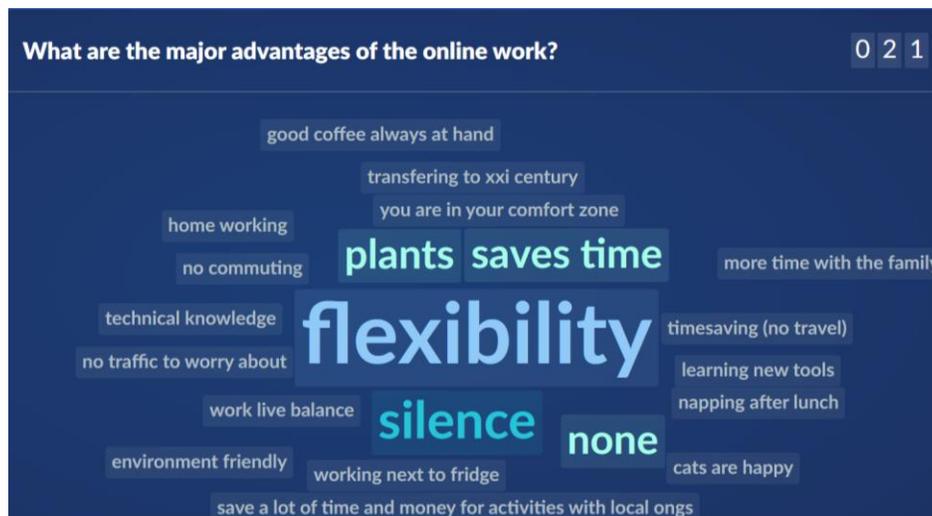
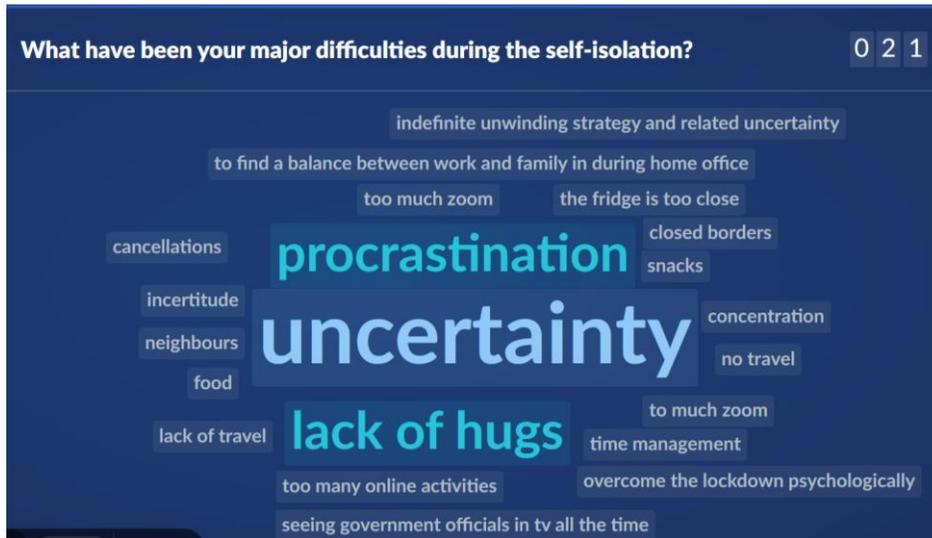
Monday 8 June, 14:00-15:30 CET | Tuesday 9 June, 09:30-11:30 CET

Session PowerPoint presentation available [here](#).

Summary

Following opening remarks by WG1 Coordinators, Sofia Strive and Mikayel Hovhannisyan, participants introduced themselves in a 'tour de table', before engaging in a series of icebreaker activities via Sli.do. During this section, participants expressed some of the difficulties they have faced during the current pandemic, but also shared a number of advantages that have arisen from the switch to online work formats. Two of the 'word clouds' produced from these interactions can be seen below.





Next, members of the EaP CSF Secretariat made an introductory presentation about the work, structure and activities of the Forum.

In light of the current epidemiological situation, delegates will be asked to approve two changes to the Forum's activities: extending the mandate of the current Steering Committee and WG Coordinators until the Annual Assembly, or the end of the year (whichever the sooner), and extending the current project, which is due to expire at the end of this year.

Updates were given on the Forum's #PrepareEaP4Health campaign, the new membership database and members' newsletter, the current regranting cycle, and the recent successes and future priorities of the Forum's advocacy work.

Going forward, the immediate priorities and actions for WG1 include deciding on a topic for the group's next policy paper (which should address the impact of COVID on an aspect of the group's area of expertise), participating in EaP platform and panel meetings when they resume in an online format, and providing concrete recommendations and inputs to the European Commission's elaboration of the next EaP deliverables.

Policy debate 1: Media freedom during the COVID-19 crisis

Tuesday 9 June, 14:00-15.30 CET

Conclusions and recommendations paper can be viewed [here](#).

Session PowerPoint presentation available [here](#).

Summary

The COVID crisis has had a particularly adverse impact on local, regional and independent media outlets, whose revenues from advertising have fallen drastically and whose access to digital working is at times rather limited. Across the media sector more broadly, accessing complete and reliable information has been a particular challenge: on the one hand, a number of governments have been slow to respond to media requests for information, or have provided incomplete and at times ambiguous information, while on the other hand, outright disinformation about the pandemic from mostly foreign sources has permeated social networks and online media too.

In the face of these difficulties, a number of support mechanisms were suggested. Some of these are bottom-up measures, relating to collaboration between media CSOs to build capacity (for example, by sharing best practices on fundraising and monetising content) and raise awareness around police violence, the plight of investigative journalists and specific challenges being faced by particular sub-sectors like radio. Other measures are more top-down, requiring a concerted lobbying effort to encourage EU institutions to use their economic and other leverage to improve the situation for the media sector in the EaP region. Ultimately, participants agreed that a combination of both bottom-up and top-down approaches will be the way forward.

Policy debate 2: Election integrity in the time of COVID-19 and beyond

Wednesday 10 June, 09:30-11:00 CET

Conclusions and recommendations paper can be viewed [here](#).

Session PowerPoint presentation available [here](#).

Summary



The Belarus presidential election is to take place at the beginning of August and Georgia is getting ready for parliamentary elections in the autumn. However, election processes go far beyond polling day itself, and in light of this there are nonetheless a number of developments requiring further attention: the progress of electoral reforms in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the transparency of campaign financing in Moldova and of the legislative process in Azerbaijan and Belarus, and the broader use of administrative resources to gain political advantages and restrict access to information in many parts of the region. In the case of Azerbaijan and Belarus, the repression of opposition activists and networks are also a cause for concern.

Recommendations for improving the integrity of elections and the political process in the EaP region include ensuring that civil society is always on hand to offer its assistance and expertise to the EU institutions going forward, and advocating for greater financial and institutional support to CSOs' monitoring activities.

Policy debate 3: Resilience as the new approach to EaP until 2030, in light of COVID-19

Wednesday 10 June, 09:30-11:00 CET

Conclusions and recommendations paper can be viewed [here](#).

Summary

Resilience is defined as the basic capacity to sustain and overcome external and domestic shocks. While this definition links resilience to security, it is also closely connected to the issue of public trust in the authorities, since a society in which the government and the public are unable to work together is less likely to be able to surmount collective challenges. With the COVID-19 crisis having exposed the many vulnerabilities of our respective societies, the importance of working together has been further highlighted.

Following country updates and group discussions, a number of recommendations to EU stakeholders were proposed. These include encouraging the EU to provide more clarity on its own interpretation of 'resilience', advocating for a greater role for civil society in implementing EU activities and policies aimed at strengthening resilience in EaP countries, and identifying areas in which the EU can complement the resilience-building actions of other institutions such as NATO, to avoid inefficient overlaps.

Policy debate 4: Impact of COVID-19 on gender policies and domestic violence

Wednesday 10 June, 14:00-15:30 CET

Conclusions and recommendations paper can be viewed [here](#).

Summary



Women have been particularly affected by the COVID pandemic, for a number of reasons. First, women represent the majority of healthcare workers in the EaP countries, exposing them to a greater risk of contracting the virus. Second, lockdown has led to a number of challenges, including difficult financial pressures on women entrepreneurs, greater stresses related to childcare and supplementing educational provision where online distance learning has not been implemented, and an increase in domestic violence. The latter is one area where civil society has led the way, for example, developing an app in Georgia which allows women to report cases of domestic violence directly to the Ministry of the Interior.

The takeaway from all of this is that virus mitigation policies are insufficiently gender mainstreamed - if at all. As we enter a gradual 'reopening' of society, and begin preparations for a potential second wave, these ongoing and future policies need to be effectively gender mainstreamed. Civic initiatives - like a recent Moldovan campaign to provide 1000 laptops to disadvantaged women teachers, and the provision of food and shelter to victims of abuse, among other examples - will be vital to ensuring the successful inclusion of all gender groups in crisis mitigation policies, and the EU and local authorities should support such actions.

Policy debate 5: Human rights during the COVID-19 crisis

Thursday 11 June, 09:30-11:00 CET

Conclusions and recommendations paper can be viewed [here](#).

Summary

The main human rights concerns in the current context relate to restrictions on freedom of assembly (and, in some cases, on civil society action), a lack of transparency and reliable information from certain governments surrounding the pandemic, and unequal access to education (especially in rural areas, and in countries where distance learning mechanisms have not been supported by the central government) and healthcare. As we move towards the second half of this year, and a number of scheduled elections, political freedoms are also coming under pressure in some quarters, with politically motivated charges against presidential candidates in Belarus a particularly worrying development.

To improve the human rights situation, a number of measures can be taken by the EU, including (but not limited to) granting EaP civil society more control over EU aid to their respective countries, encouraging the greater participation of civil society in the elaboration and implementation of legislation and reforms, and adopting a stronger, principled stance over human rights violations, such as the recent police violence in Azerbaijan.

Policy debate 6: The fight against corruption in light of COVID-19

Thursday 11 June, 14:00-15:30 CET



Conclusions and recommendations paper can be viewed [here](#).

Session PowerPoint presentation available [here](#).

Summary

The economic difficulties arising from the COVID-19 crisis have led to a rise in impoverishment and economic hardship, in turn creating space for corruption to set in and even thrive. Add to this the obvious effect that restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly are having on transparency and accountability in public life, and it is clear that the integrity of public institutions in the EaP region, as well as the efficacy of civil society monitoring activities, are under threat.

In the face of the current public health emergency, a number of countries have sought to ease the epidemiological situation in prisons by releasing some prisoners early. With a considerable proportion of those earmarked for release having been convicted of corruption, this situation may well deteriorate further in the longer term. Indeed, while a number of EaP countries do now have pretty good e-procurement systems, budget changes and accelerated procurement processes during the pandemic have made it more difficult to follow the money and ensure it reaches its legitimate intended destination.

Going forward, a number of measures are proposed. Foremost among these are for the EU to condition its financial support to EaP governments against the adequate investigation of high-level corruption and the adoption of measures increasing the transparency of public life. Further areas of attention should include strengthening international cooperation against money laundering (including through the adoption and implementation of a Magnitsky-style act), and facilitating the greater involvement of civil society in monitoring implementation of EaP transparency and anti-corruption reforms.

Meeting with EU stakeholders

June 12, Friday, 13.30-15.00

Summary

In their opening remarks, WG1 Coordinators, Sofia Strive and Mikayel Hovhannisyan, remarked upon the importance of holding a WG meeting at this time: with the COVID-19 crisis posing considerable challenges in a range of policy areas while having also highlighted the vital nature of the civil society sector in addressing a number of these issues, the time is right to engage with decision makers and stakeholders. Indeed, by sharing our expertise and collectively elaborating recommendations, we can influence policy and ensure a greater role for the Forum going forward.

Following this, **Andrius Kubilius MEP**, Co-President of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, highlighted the importance of working together in times of crisis, emphasising that it is international cooperation through formats such as the EaP which provide countries with the ability

to adapt to new difficulties and to seize new opportunities together. While he believes that the most apparent risk posed by the COVID-19 crisis is to the economy, this will in turn have implications for democracy and human rights. As such, the EU should adopt concrete policies and measures to strengthen basic democratic institutions and values in the EaP countries - particularly those with governmental monomajorities, working in close collaboration with civil society in doing so.

Next, **Lawrence Meredith**, Director for the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood at DG NEAR, began his remarks with a defence of the EU's response to the COVID-19 crisis. Despite claims the institutions were too slow to react, he insists this wasn't the case: as "the most reliable partner the EaP region has ever had", the EU has already provided 7 million masks, 4 million gloves, and reprogrammed more than €1 billion of financial assistance, including some €900 million for mitigating the socio-economic effects of the crisis. This represents the fastest reprogramming process he has ever witnessed in all his years working at the Commission, and all of this occurred despite the complexity of the situation, and the necessity of securing the agreement of so many stakeholders. Turning to the future of the EaP policy, he stated that the current proposals set out in the Joint Communication represent evolution, not revolution. They include a much greater focus on values, spreading this aspect across two or more priority areas as a new cross-cutting priority, while also putting the economy first. Stepping up work on the two major transformations of our age - Green, and digital - is also an important part of the proposed new framework, and civil society has been (and will be) vital in this on both the technical and policy side.

Following a summary of the discussions and recommendations from each of the policy debates, Lawrence Meredith praised the details and expertise behind these contributions, saying that they paint a clear picture of the situation on the ground, and lay down good guidelines for the appropriate policy response. In the subsequent Q&A session, Mr Meredith cited the full implementation of OSCE and Council of Europe recommendations on electoral integrity as a personal priority of his, reassured participants that concerns over state ownership of the aviation sector have not trumped human rights reservations in the EU's ongoing negotiations with Azerbaijan (contrary to some reports), and indicated that more COVID-mitigation support to EaP civil society is coming, in addition to the €11 million already allocated within the Solidarity Programme.

Once Mr Meredith left the meeting, after the Q&A session, Mikayel Hovhannisyan took the opportunity to ask participants to reflect on the future: what the WG's policy priorities should be, and which activities should be planned in line with those priorities. He went on to suggest that members may wish to consider utilising the online format of this week's meetings to engage in more detailed policy discussions to allow the formulation of concrete recommendations for the EaP policy going forward, or to facilitate capacity-building workshops in key areas of need.

In her closing remarks, Sofia Strive expressed her hope that the discussions this week had been useful, and emphasised the importance of working closely together. Indeed, since we're all facing many of the same challenges today, in terms of shared experiences we are perhaps closer than ever before, despite being unable to meet physically. Mikayel Hovhannisyan added that the

week's meeting had demonstrated the enormous potential, knowledge and experience that this group has as a platform for our initiatives, as we seek to rapidly and jointly develop new solutions to emerging challenges.

Natalia Yerashevich set out the next steps for the WG and the Forum, including the convocation of a Steering Committee meeting and public event to discuss the results of the EU-EaP leaders' meeting, and turning our attention to the new deliverables. From an organisational perspective, these online meetings were a trial, but appear to have worked well. As such, there should be some reflection on the place of this format in the future, to see if it could be utilised on a more permanent basis within the framework of the new project for 2021-2023.