

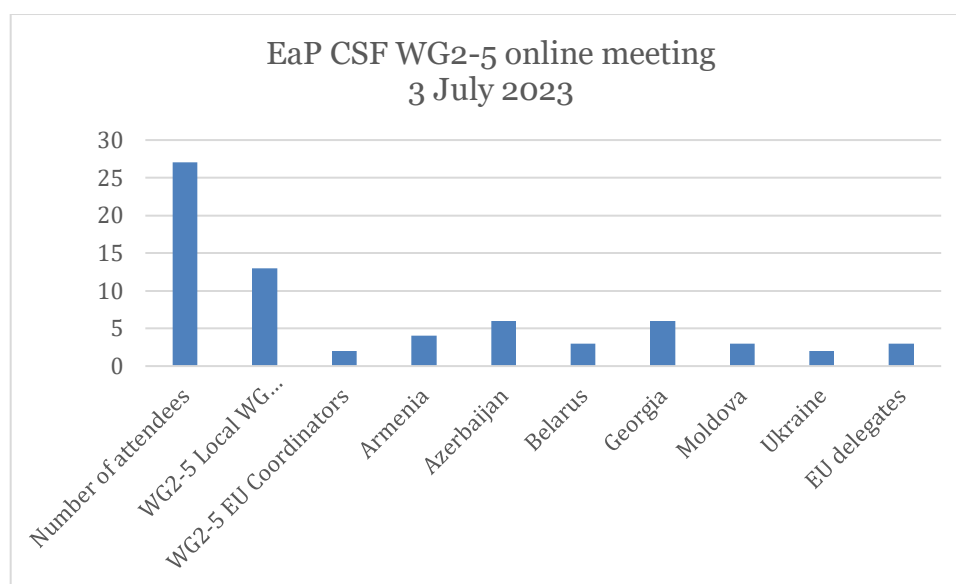
Updated Version, September 2023

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Working Group 2-5

Online Meeting, 3 July 2023

Report

The EaP CSF Working Groups 2 and 5 met online on 3 July 2023. Spread over three online sessions, the meeting began with individual country updates from the local WG coordinators focused on ongoing policy priorities. In the second session, EaP CSF Secretariat staff members presented joint advocacy opportunities with the delegates. In the third and last session, delegates had the opportunity to discuss trade cooperation between the EU and the EaP countries with a representative from the European Commission (DG TRADE). The meeting was attended by the EaP CSF WG2-5 delegates only. Out of 27 attendees, 16 were local or EU coordinators. The chart below shows the distribution between the six EaP countries and EU member states.



Session 1 - Introduction and Country Updates

Monday 3 July, 09:00-11:00 CEST

The opening session began with opening remarks from Working Group 2-5 coordinators **Laura Dittel**, **Goda Neverauskaitė** and the newly elected WG2 EaP coordinator – **Nino Elizbarashvili**. The agenda for the day was covered. One minute of silence was observed in memory of the late Gayane Poghosyan – a representative of the Foundation for Small and Medium Businesses from Armenia.

Short presentations of country-level developments by WG2 and WG5 local coordinators from the EaP CSF National Platforms (NPs) followed. The local WG coordinators focused on the state of play in their respective countries in relation to achieving resilient, sustainable, and integrated economies; on the state of the social and labour policies; and the main challenges faced and, consequently, prioritized for action by respective Working Groups.

Country updates:

Konstantin Zhgenti – the WG2 local coordinator from Georgia during the presentation and in his input, submitted in writing to the EaP CSF Secretariat on 01/08/2023, highlighted that the Georgian Government and MOESD have been passive about joining important EU programs, despite extensive lobbying efforts by GNP and WG2. While MOESD has shown interest in the Single Market Program, they have not yet joined vital programs like LIFE and Digital Europe. In response, Georgian ministries and local self-governance bodies are creating entities to replace CSOs and private businesses in service provision, leading to unfair competition with state agencies. This neglects the local CSO sector, and if not rectified, many CSOs, especially in regions, may cease operations. Konstantin requests that the EU avoid supporting programs where state agencies provide services directly, urging them to outsource services to qualified local CSOs and private sector entities.

The member from Belarus – the WG5 local coordinator once again focused on the worsening conditions for civil society, which continues its work underground. With social migrants leaving for abroad, official unemployment statistics are at 4%, but it is higher. People leave the country. Independent trade unions were destroyed, while Alexander Lukashenko signed a decree to create state-owned trade unions. The member further focused on the pressing issue of political prisoners in Belarus and called the meeting participants to discuss these topics. He noted that the participation of EaP CSF, including the WG2 and WG5, in implementing Article 33 of the Charter for Belarus to release trade union activists and other political prisoners in Belarus would be important.

Lasha Bliadze – the WG5 local coordinator from Georgia presented updates on the reform of labour relations, which is currently ongoing. Lasha touched upon the changes in legislation, rising migration from Georgia, and we also increasing number of migrants from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. The Parliament of Georgia approved an amendment to the Law on Labour Migration according to which intermediary companies must be obliged to go through the certification process to obtain the right to work for foreign citizens or foreign employers. Currently, the Georgian specialists are involved in the working group developing the healthcare legislation, which will further bring the Georgian Labour Law in line with AA and EU standards. E.g.: the employees will receive overtime wages after 40 hours per week – something that will equally benefit the tourism industry workers. The mandate of the labour inspection has been increased in Georgia, which has operated as an independent agency since 2021 with regional structures to inspect both safety issues and labour rights. At the same time, the culture in labour relations remains poor with inflation stimulating the rise in conflicts and strikes. The Georgian Trade Unions Confederation is engaged in relevant awareness-raising activities.

Samir Aliyev – the WG2 local coordinator from Azerbaijan focused on monetary policy and its effects on inflation. Azerbaijan adopted a strategy for economic development, which is based on the National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development adopted in 2021. The strategy packages cover economic inclusiveness, modern innovation, environment, and protection – topics of high relevance. Samir Aliyev raised concerns about the restrictive environment for the NGOs in Azerbaijan and issues linked with information transparency.

Sahib Mammadov, replacing the WG5 local coordinator Mirvari Gahramanli at the meeting, focused on the recommendations of the two UN committees (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) to revoke occupational bans for women at work in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has a problem with minimum wages equalling 200 USD in the country. During the last three years, inflation for general consumer goods skyrocketed. Utilities are also more expensive. As a result, people become more and more poor. Although, according to official statistics, the poor constitute only 5.9% of the population¹, the real picture might be much higher.

¹<https://www.adb.org/countries/azerbaijan/poverty#:~:text=Poverty%20Data%3A%20Azerbaijan&text=In%20Azerbaijan%2C%205.9%25%20of%20the,die%20before%20their%205th%20birthday> .

Tatoul Manasseryan – the WG2 local coordinator from Armenia highlighted security as the number one priority in Armenia, including economic security. The WG2 of the Armenian NP is facing financial difficulties and as a result, is motivating field experts to be involved in the work of the Armenian NP. CEPA has been named as a relevant platform to meet with Armenian government officials and MPs. Continuation of a joint dialogue in certain areas of CEPA has been agreed between the civil society and the government. Looking to the future, the Armenian NP is interested in promoting the European agenda, green economy, and social entrepreneurship projects. Tatoul Manasseryan further raised concerns regarding the deteriorating situation of the refugees and displaced people from Artsakh and highlighted the immediate need for post-conflict reconstruction with a strong focus on a sustainable integrated economy and ensuring economic security.

Hasmik Aslanyan – the WG5 local coordinator from Armenia, in her input submitted in writing to the EaP CSF Secretariat on 17/09/2023, highlighted several challenges stemming from the intricate geopolitical dynamics within the EaP region, particularly in the South Caucasus. They mostly encompass internal and external security risks, as well as numerous socio-economic aspects. In response, the priorities identified by the Armenian members of WG5 refer to enhancing civil society engagement across all levels of EaP policy discussions with stakeholders, and advocating for the European agenda, with a specific emphasis on pursuing EU membership. They also underscore the critical necessity of co-creating new formats, models, and agendas for social dialogue, drawing inspiration from European models, and actively implementing post-conflict confidence building measures.

Viorel Chivriga – the WG2 local coordinator from Moldova spoke of the shocks on the economy caused by Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine, the impact of which can also be observed in Moldova, specifically, in the areas of energy security and economy. Moldova is currently in a difficult position linked to the current risks. First, in 2023, we have seen a decrease in GDP by 20%. Production decreased by 6%. Export decreased by 4.8%. Viorel Chivriga outlined four directions in which the WG could continue working: efficient cooperation between WGs and NPs and local governments; cooperation and creation of new CSOs; members of the WG2 to continue active involvement in controlling the implementation of government policies; and continuing to inform local population against propaganda and provide refugees from Ukraine with places to stay.

Sergiu Iurcu – the WG2 local coordinator from Moldova spoke about the country’s progress made on its path of implementation of the EU’s recommendations needed to open negotiations. The government created 33 working groups. The International Confederation of Trade Union (ICTU), which Sergiu Iurcu represents, participates in the work of most working groups. When speaking of labour markets in Moldova, Sergiu mentioned the increase in the labour force coupled with the loss of work and increased rates of unemployment. GDP is not at the same growth level as before, but the labour market is becoming more active. The ICTU conducts regular negotiations on salary raises. Last year, they were able to adopt a single minimum pay across regions – 200 Euros from January 2023. Increasing the minimum wage or at least 50% of the median wage: 270 Euros is the goal of ongoing negotiations.

Valeriy Repin – the WG5 local coordinator from Ukraine recapped the work of civil society to help the army and conduct humanitarian activities. From the first day of aggression, SMEs changed their activities and important information was transferred to the government. Currently, the “Chronicles of the War against Ukraine” project is ongoing, which will entail 2 initiatives within WG5. First, on optimisation of participation of local self-governance bodies in social dialogue. Currently, a proposal for what needs to be changed in Ukrainian legislation is being drafted. The second initiative would focus on best practices with social partners in the governance of sustainable tourism with the case study of Sweden. The Entrepreneurs’ Professional Union also works towards changes in labour legislation. Discussion in Rada on how we conduct social dialogue in Ukraine has been taking place. The so-called “3+” system is being discussed: public-private partnership plus civil society. The most important result is the inclusion of community organisations and institutions of local self-governance as part of social dialogue. The goals for the work of WG5 are to focus on confidence building, involvement of CSOs on national and local levels, and creation of a system of constructive communication between actual and potential participants in the social dialogue. Learning about the best practices for conducting social dialogues in the EU would be useful.

Session 2 – Joint advocacy opportunities within the EaP CSF

Monday 3 July, 11:15-12:15 CEST

Tania Marocchi, the Policy and Advocacy Manager at the EaP CSF Secretariat, reported to the delegates on the EaP CSF's activities since the Annual Assembly and on internal updates. She reported on two key decisions taken at the SC meeting in Brussels in April: a) to extend the mandate of current EaP CSF delegates; b) the announcement of a new call for delegates before the end of 2023.

Further issues and projects presented by Secretariat staff members **Tania Marocchi**, **Kristina Pitalskaia**, **Alexandra Sabou** and **Pascal Willaumez** were:

- New staff members at the Secretariat
- WG Coordinator elections in WG2, 3 and 5
- Operational Capacity Assessment (OCA) of the EaP CSF and its NPs
- Implementation of Gender Mainstreaming Strategy (GMS)
 - GMS vision note adopted by the SC in April 2023
 - Gender focus points to be established, including at the level of NPs
 - Gender subgroups to be established at NP-level by 2024
- [SHAPEDEM-EU](#)
 - Pilot project “Democracy Learning Loop”
 - Living labs
 - Podcast
- External advocacy
 - Public events
 - Ad hoc advocacy
 - Contribution to EP reports and resolutions
 - Public statements
- Human Rights Dialogues
- Podcast cooperation with New Eastern Europe (journal)
- EaP Index (launch in autumn 2023)
- Annual Assembly (Autumn 2023)

Session 3 – Stakeholder meeting. Economic Priorities: Future of the Eastern Partnership and the Chisinau-Minsk- EU’s economic cooperation

Monday 3 July, 13:15-14:45 CEST

During the stakeholder session, WG2 and WG5 members discussed with **Fredrik Beckvid Tranchell**, **DG TRADE**, Member of Cabinet, Europe and Eastern Neighbourhood, European Commission, the current state of trade cooperation between the EU and EaP region. The discussion showed that, while increased policy alignments materialise, progress in cooperation differs with individual EaP countries. Currently, the cooperation between the EU and the EaP countries happens across different comprehensive free trade areas representing ambitious agreements and almost full tariff liberalization except for a few quotas. It is important in bringing the EaP countries closer to the internal market. When working with Ukraine and Moldova as candidate countries, different comprehensive free trade agreements help the EU maintain progress.

For **Ukraine**, the acceleration of this agenda of alignment with the EU market internal rules is a priority. 29 actions will be followed up every month, for example, on roaming charges (EU telecommunications

rules). The EU and Ukraine will have agreements on conformity assessment and acceptance of industrial products which are visa-free for products because of which the EU and Ukraine will have the same technical standards for sale in the EU and Ukraine. As an EU candidate country, **Moldova** is currently focused on enlargement, as part of which, the country will have to fully align with EU legislation in terms of social, environmental, and labour laws. No preferential agreements are in place for **Armenia**, and discussions are not in place about liberalizing the tariffs. In **Georgia**, implementation of the deep and comprehensive free trade agreement continues as well as technical assistance to improve the capacity of the Georgian authority of laboratory to enable more exports of cultural products. Talks are ongoing on the possibility of deepening cooperation on industrial products. The EU has agreements which form the framework of its trade relations with **Azerbaijan**, yet the process towards having an enhanced agreement is slow due to different positions on energy policies, and public procurement. Azerbaijan is currently a WTO candidate, which the EU fully supports because legal constraints are present against having a preferential trade agreement with a country that is not a member of the WTO.

Conclusions

WG2 and WG5 coordinators concluded the meeting highlighting the need for articulating top policy priorities across the region in preparation for the Annual Assembly and WG2-5 meetings planned back-to-back in autumn 2023.

The delegates also agreed to bring the topics of immediate concern to the attention of the WG coordinators and the EaP CSF Steering Committee, when needed, direct communication channels which exist at the level of each National Platform.