

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Working Group 4 Annual Activity Report 2021

November 2021

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|---|----|
| Introduction..... | 2 |
| Main findings based on the answers of National WG4 Coordinators..... | 2 |
| WG4 objectives in 2021 | 2 |
| Main achievements | 4 |
| Major challenges | 5 |
| Advocacy campaigns | 6 |
| Opportunities for civil society organisations to engage in policy development | 7 |
| Participation in the EaP architecture meetings | 7 |
| Main priorities in 2022 | 8 |
| Members' engagement..... | 9 |
| The position of National Platforms..... | 10 |
| The role and involvement of EU member organisations..... | 10 |
| Key messages for the 2021 EaP Summit..... | 10 |
| Main findings based on the answers of EU Delegates..... | 11 |
| Major areas of work in the EaP region..... | 11 |
| The progress made by EaP countries in the fields covered by WG4 | 12 |
| Main challenges for EaP civil society organisations | 13 |
| Priorities for National Working Groups in 2022..... | 14 |
| Recommendations to EaP civil society organisations | 16 |
| Key messages for the 2021 EaP Summit..... | 17 |
| Annexes..... | 21 |
| Questionnaire for National Working Group 4 Coordinators..... | 21 |
| Questionnaire for EU Delegates | 24 |

Introduction

This report provides an overview of this year’s main achievements and challenges of National Working Groups (WGs) and civil society organisations in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, in the fields of education, youth, culture, research and innovation, while also looking into future priorities, WG members’ engagement, and ways to improve cooperation at the EaP CSF, national and EU levels.

The report was elaborated based on the insights shared by the 6 National WG4 Coordinators in the EaP countries, and 11 out of 16 EU Delegates representing member organisations from Austria, Belgium, Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Sweden.

Two questionnaires were designed in order to collect input – one for National Coordinators and one for EU Delegates – and were answered in writing or through online interviews between 18 October and 5 November 2021.







The questionnaire for National Coordinators comprised of 17 open-ended questions grouped under the following sections: “Policy development, dialogue and advocacy at the national and EU level”; “Participation in the EaP architecture meetings”; “Future priorities, members’ engagement and cooperation”.

The questionnaire for EU Delegates was comprised of 7 questions and took a snapshot of the work done by the EU organisations in the EaP countries, main progress and challenges of civil society organisations in the EaP region, as well as priorities for 2022 and recommendations.

Main findings based on the answers of National WG4 Coordinators

WG4 objectives in 2021

The main goals of the EaP CSF National Platforms, in the fields of education, youth, culture, research and innovation, were the following:

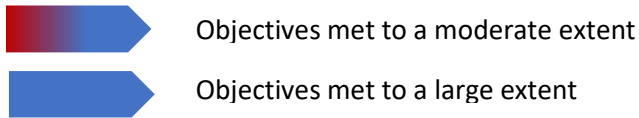
| | Armenia | Azerbaijan | Belarus | Georgia | Moldova | Ukraine |
|--------------------------------|--|---|--|---|---|---|
| Main objectives in 2021 | To provide more educational opportunities for youth, also involving cultural activities  | To protect women’s and children’s rights  | To identify new solutions to challenges in the field of education  | To inform the general public about the European integration process through mass media  | To address the challenges faced by the educational system during the pandemic, especially in relation to digital education  | To provide assistance with the implementation of the EaP priorities in Ukraine  |
| | To foster cooperation | To protect and | To support vulnerable | To participate in the development | To work on youth issues | To support youth mobility |



| | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|--|----------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Main objectives in 2021 | and support among WG4 member organisations | promote cultural monuments | groups (including NGO workers and volunteers) | & implementation of the national policy on full and equal participation of men and women at all decision-making levels | and promote social entrepreneurship | and participation in exchange programs |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | To improve digital literacy | To participate in the peace processes, including public diplomacy and negotiations | To provide social services and organize volunteering during the pandemic | To tap into Ukraine's status as associated country to the Horizon Programme before Horizon 2020 comes to an end |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | To equip youth with the skills necessary for greater involvement in decision-making through non-formal education | | To promote the active participation of public organisations in the development of the creative sector | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | To support the development of digital technologies in the field of education | |
| | | | | | | |



Objectives met to a little extent



The extent to which goals were met differs across countries and objectives.

Azerbaijan reported having achieved both its objectives to a moderate extent, while Georgia and Ukraine also reported objectives that were met to a large extent despite assessing their overall accomplishment rate as mostly average. Belarus and Moldova considered that their goals were moderately met, but also reported one goal that was met to a little extent (addressing the challenges of the educational system in Moldova, and supporting vulnerable groups in Belarus). Armenia placed itself at the low achievement end of the spectrum.

When asked about the reasons for the poor achievement rate applying to some of their objectives, Moldova mentioned political uncertainty (presidential and parliamentary elections, interim government and impossibility of making and holding long-term commitments), Belarus referred to the repressive political regime, whereas Armenia mainly pointed to the post-war crisis and the pandemic. Georgia also highlighted the negative role that the pandemic and the unstable situation in the South Caucasus played in accomplishing the goals that had been originally set.

Main achievements

When asked about main achievements in 2021, the **Armenian** Coordinator mainly referred to the WG's work in the field of youth and to the steps taken for the adoption of the Film Law. Notably, the Coordinator mentioned: engaging young people in shaping the country's youth policy for 2021-2025; the youth programme started by the City Hall of Yerevan based on the input of and cooperation with organisations and experts that are part of WG4; training programs aimed at empowering local actors (e.g. the one conducted in Dilijan for empowering local actors for development in the Lower Tavush region) which continue to be successful despite participants' travel concerns given the post-war context; the Film Law that was adopted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia on May 7, 2021, following the work and advocacy started by the Golden Apricot Fund for Cinema Development, one of the WG 4 member organisations.

In **Belarus**, no achievements were reported at the national level given the political situation in the country. However, one initiative stood out in the field of education – Education for Change – implemented with the support of the European Union (<https://www.educhangebelarus.com>). The program aims at reforming education according to European quality standards for educational programs, methodology, and management.

The National Coordinator in **Azerbaijan** highlighted the WG's participation in meetings held by the Parliamentary Committee on Family, Women and Children Affairs, the social media campaigns on domestic violence against women, and also the research conducted on protecting victims of domestic violence and human trafficking whose findings were shared with Government agencies. At EU level, two major accomplishments stood out: the position paper “Empowering Women in Azerbaijan” and the research paper “Assessing the Impact of the COVID 19 Pandemic on Human Trafficking Victims”, which were shared with the EU Delegation to Azerbaijan, relevant European institutions and embassies.

In **Georgia**, among the main achievements were the panel discussions organized by WG4 within the frame of the high-level conference “European Choice of the Georgian People – Challenges and Future Perspectives” (27-28 May 2021), jointly organized by the EaP CSF National Platform and the Government of Georgia. One of the panels focused on the reconciliation policy with a 2024 perspective, as well as on the humanitarian crisis and assistance to Akhgori and Gali Districts. The other panel discussed how to engage youth in decision-making to a greater extent as well as regional challenges to youth’s involvement in public life. Other achievements at national level were: the participation of the WG4 Coordinator in the round table on "Youth in Georgia - Strengthening Young People’s Employment, Entrepreneurship and Participation" organized by the Delegation of the European Union to Georgia and the Youth Agency of Georgia; taking part in meetings organized by state agencies or ministries e.g., the Youth Agency of Georgia, the Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, in the fields of youth, non-formal education, 10-year strategy for civic equality and integration; drafting position papers on conflict-related issues and in the fields of education and science. At EU level, the National Coordinator mentioned the official statements and positions prepared by the Group in regard to the commitments made under the Association Agreement.

In **Moldova**, WG4’s most important outcomes were youth-related. Notably, the National Coordinator mentioned the recommendations made concerning the National Youth Strategy for 2021-2025, which were included in the strategy evaluation report, and the “Where is the Agency?” campaign of the National Youth Council in Moldova, advocating for the creation of a National Youth Agency, which was recognized as a priority by the new Government. The WG also took part in campaigns and actions initiated by the National Platform e.g., concerning the situation in Belarus.

In **Ukraine**, three major achievements at the national level were: having the WG’s proposals on digital transformation in the fields of education and science taken into consideration by the Ministry for Education and Science; participating in the technical negotiations concerning Ukraine’s status as Associated Country to the new Horizon Europe Programme, based on the country’s experience with the Horizon 2020 Programme; the proposals made for a digital competence framework in the cultural sector. At EU level, advocating for more action on EU4Innovation - the EU initiative that supports the development of innovation capacities in EaP countries - was the main highlight for 2021.

Major challenges

In terms of main challenges, the National Coordinator in **Armenia** pointed to the very limited funding available in the fields covered by WG4 (small EU grants of up to 300 EUR, the Armenian Government’s decision to significantly cut budget to education, science, culture and sport), and suggested setting up an EaP CSF re-granting scheme focused on youth, education, and culture.

In **Azerbaijan**, the major challenge to the research conducted by the WG in 2021 was the lack of accurate statistical data at the national level. The challenge was overcome with the help of alternative reports and independent experts.

In **Belarus**, the growing pressure on civil society continued to be the main issue. A significant number of NGOs were forced to close down, civic activists were imprisoned or fled the country.

The National Coordinator in **Georgia** considered the pandemic to be the main barrier to implementing the WG activities as originally planned.

In **Moldova**, the main issues that WG4 dealt with were political uncertainty and the dissatisfactory participation of some of the member organisations in Group meetings, which rendered decision-making difficult at the Group level. The two suggestions made for overcoming the latter challenge were to exclude the inactive organisations based on a certain number of meetings not attended or to consider the lack of any comments to a certain proposal as tacit consent. The proposal to revise the National Platform's internal regulations in order to accommodate these changes is still pending approval.

In **Ukraine**, the biggest challenge at the national level was the poor activity rate of public organisations, which determined the WG to also cooperate with other organisations having different areas of expertise. At the EU level, the main issue was the entirely formal response to the WG's suggestions.

Advocacy campaigns

The **Armenian** Coordinator mentioned three major advocacy initiatives and outcomes: the campaign initiated by the Golden Apricot Fund for Cinema Development in order to have a Film Law in Armenia – the Law was adopted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia on May 7, 2021; the advocacy work done in the context of the Youth Policy Strategy 2021 – 2025, adopted by the Armenian Government in June 2021; the new youth programme created by the City Hall of Yerevan based on the input and involvement of WG4 members (especially of the Armenian Progressive Youth).

The National Coordinator in **Azerbaijan** emphasized that the advocacy work involved not only WG members but also external NGOs and mass media, and brought to the forefront two campaigns – “Papa Schools”, implemented by the “Young Leaders” Education, Training and Development Public Union, with the aim to prevent family breakdown, and the social media campaign implemented by the Women Reformers and Innovation Public Union to support women in leadership roles.

The **Georgian** Coordinator did not refer to any advocacy campaigns in particular, but highlighted the Group's effective cooperation with the National Civil Society Platform Board which has a very good communication with WG members and ensures timely publication of any position papers and statements on the Platform's official website and on the national media portal.

In **Moldova**, two major advocacy initiatives addressed youth and have been already mentioned under main achievements in 2021 (the recommendations concerning the National Youth Strategy for 2021-2025, and the “Where is the Agency?” campaign of the National Youth Council in Moldova). Another advocacy initiative focused on social entrepreneurship and led to the revision of the national legal framework in this field, but also to the creation of a Social Entrepreneurship Platform that promotes best practices. The National Coordinator emphasized that there was an advocacy plan at the Group level that clearly mentioned objectives, activities and funding sources available for the implementation of the plan.

The National Coordinator in **Ukraine** stated that it was difficult to run advocacy campaigns as a Group, and mentioned the WG's participation in one meeting of the Parliamentary Committee on Ukraine's Integration into the EU.

The WG in **Belarus** did not report any advocacy campaigns.

Opportunities for civil society organisations to engage in policy development

Civil society organisations in **Armenia** were actively involved in public consultation processes throughout the year, especially concerning the elaboration and adoption of the Film Law, and the development of youth and educational programmes.

In **Azerbaijan**, the engagement of civil society remains problematic given that NGOs' access to international financial instruments has been seriously limited starting 2014, when the Government introduced restrictive requirements for donor registration, registration of foreign grants, service contracts and donations. Therefore, it is very difficult for civil society organisations to carry out their activities and to influence policy-making, and the situation continues despite the many proposals and calls to amend current legislation.

In **Georgia**, the National Platform has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Parliament of Georgia, which regularly provides information to the Secretariat of the Platform on ongoing legislative initiatives. Due to this partnership, civil society organisations had the opportunity to prepare position papers and attend meetings of Parliamentary Committees in 2021. Moreover, organisations were invited to take part in sectoral meetings with representatives of several ministries, and to discuss various strategic documents.

In **Moldova**, there were no major opportunities for civil society organisations to engage in policy development due to the uncertain political situation (elections, interim government).

In **Ukraine**, the main opportunities to take part in policy-making were one meeting of the Parliamentary Committee on Ukraine's Integration into the EU, and the working groups organized by various Ministries e.g., the one organized by the Ministry of Education and Science to develop the Roadmap for Integration into the European Research Area.

The WG in **Belarus** did not report any opportunities for civil society to engage in policy development.

In terms of monitoring the implementation of national reforms, in the fields covered by WG4, most respondents answered that this was the responsibility of the member organisations which were active in the respective fields. For example, in Moldova, member organisations were in charge of preparing and presenting briefing notes during WG meetings. The Ukrainian National Coordinator mentioned that the participation of WG members in public hearings (in the case of draft regulations), meetings of Parliamentary Committees, and events held by universities, institutes and other similar organisations, was the main method to monitor reforms.

Participation in the EaP architecture meetings

All National Coordinators (except the one in Belarus who didn't have enough information to answer the question) reported a high level of interest and participation in the EaP architecture meetings, even though there was no specific tool to monitor the number of events attended or the number of WG representatives who attended. The National Coordinator in Moldova stated that members' participation was much easier to monitor when the events took place in person, whereas the National Coordinator in Armenia said that such data were usually collected by the Secretariat of the National Platform. Most WG members positively evaluated their participation in architecture meetings, especially when they had sound experience concerning the topics discussed, and could make valuable inputs. The quality of

members' contribution to these meetings was a cause of concern to the Coordinator in Moldova, given the overwhelming number of online events going on at the same time as well as members' tendency to multitask when attending digital events.

Main priorities in 2022

All WGs set priorities in the field of education for 2022, and most WGs focused on youth and culture to a great extent.

| | Armenia | Azerbaijan | Belarus | Georgia | Moldova | Ukraine |
|--------------------------------|---|--|--|--|--|---|
| Main priorities in 2022 | 1. Raising funds for educational and cultural projects | 1. Women's rights and empowerment 2. Simplification of the visa regime for NGOs and, especially, youth organisations 3. Education and culture | 1. Preserving civil society's potential 2. Supporting collaborative initiatives in the fields of education and humanitarian aid | 1. Youth issues and collaboration with the Youth Agency of Georgia 2. Conflict issues 3. The 10-year strategy of the Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality 4. Non-formal education | 1. Education 2. Youth and social entrepreneurship 3. Social services and volunteering | 1. Education 2. Research 3. Creative industries 4. Digital skills 5. Youth and academic mobility 6. Active participation of civil society organisations in EU competitions |

When asked how the EaP CSF could help with the priorities mentioned above, most National Coordinators referred to financial support, but also to bringing EaP issues to the EU table. The National Coordinator in Azerbaijan stated that the Forum should strengthen its ability to influence national governments with the support of the EU, and should facilitate the organisation of international events featuring EU and national stakeholders. The Coordinator in Georgia considered that small grants competitions and position papers in the WG4 priority areas were important, whereas the Coordinator in Moldova mentioned that the youth organisations in WG4 asked to form a separate group or at least a prominent sub-group. Concerning youth, one EaP CSF delegate who is also member of the WG in Moldova made two comments during the WG4 Thematic Session of the Annual Assembly:

- a. There should be a focus on adapting the language of public policy design for youth workers because, otherwise, the capacity of youth organisations and, eventually, of the whole WG, to push for change will be seriously limited;

- b. In the context of the New Deal for Youth, the WG’s capacity to meaningfully contribute to planning and monitoring needs to be increased, and interconnectedness with other fields of intervention needs to be developed so that youth can have their say on a great number of topics such as economic recovery, environmental policy, etc.

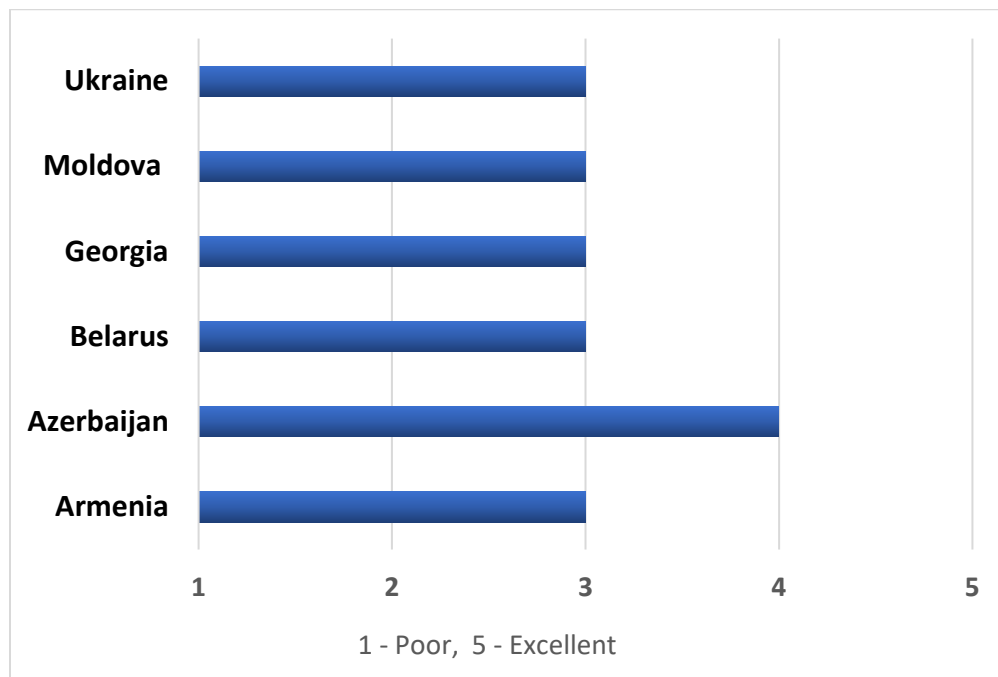
Most Coordinators also thought that the role of WG4 in the EaP architecture should be strengthened.

Members’ engagement

When asked to rate member organisations’ interest and activity on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being poor and 5 – excellent), five National Coordinators considered members’ engagement to be rather average (3). The National Coordinators in Moldova and Armenia pinpointed that there was only a small percentage of organisations highly involved in and having excellent contributions to the WG activities. However, passive organisations made up the largest share.

The National Coordinator in Azerbaijan was the only one who rated members’ engagement higher (4), saying that the major issue organisations dealt with was the impossibility of applying for foreign funds.

Engagement of WG4 member organisations



The solutions proposed by National Coordinators to members’ average activity and interest were different: fixed annual budget for the WG, besides the re-granting from EaP CSF (Armenia); regional meetings and strengthening regional representations (Georgia); modifying the National Platform’s internal procedures in order to allow for the exclusion of inactive organisations and asking organisations to include their activities in the annual advocacy plan of the WG in order to feel motivated to stay active (Moldova); identifying financial resources for motivating organisations and expanding the group by adding organisations that are active (Ukraine).

In terms of financial resources used by member organisations for implementing their projects in the EaP region, most Coordinators pointed to EU programmes while also highlighting the limited access of

their countries to some of these programmes (e.g., Armenia mentioned Creative Europe, Moldova – the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes). Other donors that respondents referred to were the German Marshall Fund (Azerbaijan), the United Nations Population Fund (Moldova), EaP CSF (most respondents). Many organisations also used their own resources.


The position of National Platforms

All National Coordinators considered that the visibility and position of National Platforms in relation to national and EU policymakers should be strengthened. The Coordinator in Armenia said that the war caused serious setback, but that there was a lot of potential that needed to be tapped into for a stronger presence. The Coordinator in Azerbaijan believed that the position could be strengthened by fostering experience exchange and involving NGOs in EU programmes. Georgia suggested that a monthly newsletter should be published, and emphasized that the EaP CSF Secretariat in Brussels should make the information published by the WG visible to EU policymakers. The Coordinator in Moldova believed that the position of the National Platform should be more prominent and that the Platform should actively participate in meetings/consultations organized by public authorities, especially that the new Government in Moldova is pro-European. The Ukrainian Coordinator stated that common topics should be identified and funding should be made available for the implementation of joint projects.


The role and involvement of EU member organisations

When asked about the role and involvement of EU member organisations in the WG, all National Coordinators except for the one in Belarus believed that this should be strengthened. In Armenia, there is a great interest for programs and events that would facilitate knowledge and experience exchange with cultural and educational organisations from the EU. According to the Armenian Coordinator, the number of EU specialists taking part in EaP events is rather small, which makes partnership developing quite challenging. The Coordinator in Moldova stated that EU member organisations were active during the WG meetings/Annual Assembly, but less active in-between. The Ukrainian Coordinator believed that EU members could involve more organisations from the EaP region in their projects, and could make use of the aid programmes available in their countries e.g., the Polish Aid Programme - Poland's development cooperation programme that includes measures taken by government agencies to provide developing countries with development assistance, humanitarian aid, and global education.

Key messages for the 2021 EaP Summit



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|-------------------|--|
| Armenia | More focus on and funding opportunities for education and culture |
| Azerbaijan | Signing an agreement with the European Union is important for Azerbaijan. We would like to see this happen soon. |
| Georgia | Get more support for the National Platform! |
| Moldova | Re-open the EaP youth window for the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes |
| Ukraine | Together we are stronger! |



Main findings based on the answers of EU Delegates

Major areas of work in the EaP region

The work done by EU member organisations in the EaP countries in 2021 addressed the following areas:

| | |
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| AEGEEE (European Students' Forum), Belgium | Inclusion of disadvantaged youth, digitalisation, empowering youth for active citizenship at local, national and European level (two case study trips aimed at assessing how the European identity is perceived in Ukraine and Armenia will be organised in November 2021) |
| The Bulgarian Union of Teachers, Bulgaria | Working with women's organisations on gender issues Overcoming violence in the workplace and ratifying the Violence and Harassment Convention (C190) of the International Labour Organisation Women's participation in the management and reconciliation of work and family life |
| Donum Animus, Latvia | Advocacy for human rights, healthcare and social inclusion of vulnerable groups |
| DVV International - Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association, Germany | Adult education and development on three levels: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Micro – Supporting partner organisations to create adult education offers - vocational education, short-term training for unemployed people, civic education, reconciliation and reintegration work (e.g., integration of displaced people/ethnic minorities in society) • Meso – Organizational support to partner organisations • Macro – Working with national authorities in EaP countries (Ministries of Education, Parliaments, etc.) for improving framework conditions (e.g., supporting the Adult Education Association in Ukraine to draft a new law on adult education, assisting the Ministry of Education in Moldova with the elaboration of a policy paper on adult education) |
| Erasmus Student Network, Belgium | Youth exchange programs, volunteering, promoting youth mobility and internationalization of education |
| Frilans Syd (The Swedish Union of Journalists), Sweden | Exchange between freelance journalists in Southern Sweden and Belarus (especially the Gomel Region) |
| Fryushet, Sweden | Establishing long-term cooperation with EaP youth organisations (e.g., the Armenian Progressive Youth) Participation in EaP CSF meetings, both internationally and locally |
| IZ - Vielfalt, Dialog, Bildung, Austria | Networking and capacity building for educators in the Caucasus region in order to help them become social activists, enhance social innovation and contribute to a more equitable society |

| | |
|--|--|
| | Providing learning and consultancy opportunities for non-profit organisations, especially community foundations and youth banks, to start social enterprises |
| Stichting Respect International West-East Bridges Foundation, The Netherlands | Culture Youth exchange |
| Youth for Exchange and Understanding, Belgium | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowering member organisations to work with youth (e.g., keeping youth active during pandemic/post-pandemic times) and to actively influence policy-making, depending on the capacities of each organisation and the national context • Supporting youth workers/trainers/facilitators/organisers of international and local activities in maintaining and improving overall mental health and wellbeing (self-care, prevention of burn-out and nurturing positive thinking attitude) and equipping them with tools for making youth work more resilient and responsive in their countries |

One respondent stated that his organisation didn't carry out any activities in the region in 2021.

The progress made by EaP countries in the fields covered by WG4

Four EU delegates considered **strengthened cooperation with EU and EaP organisations** to be one major progress made by civil society organisations in the region. Relevant examples included: the joint cooperation agreement signed by the Armenian Progressive Youth and Fryshuset, Sweden, the enhanced cooperation between the Erasmus Student Network and National Erasmus+ Offices in EaP countries - all country offices (except for Belarus) were actively engaged in the organisation of Erasmus Days, provided support to international students in their host cities, actively promoted Erasmus+ and other EU programmes; close cooperation among organisations in the EaP countries for creating joint events in the field of cultural policy e.g., concerning the mechanisms for distribution of public funds in the field of culture, models of funding culture in Eastern Europe.

Digitalization and increased adaptability to the post-pandemic working environment was seen as a main progress by two delegates. In this regard, one delegate mentioned online educational and cultural projects and conferences in the region.

Organisations working with Belarus stated that it was difficult to talk about progress in 2021, but one achievement could be considered the awareness raised among organisations and professionals outside Belarus about the situation in the country and the importance of supporting the Belarusian civil society.

Positive assessments were made about organisations and national contexts in Moldova and Armenia. For example, in the field of adult education, national authorities (e.g., Ministry of Education, Chairs of Parliamentary Committees in the field of education) were perceived as open,

committed to their work and to driving change. In Armenia, the Government was seen as open and positive, but not necessarily able to progress with its reform agenda given the political pressure from the Russian Federation. Armenian organisations were also positively evaluated for their work in the field of youth and, in particular, for their efforts to bring people to their region through different international projects and events organized under the Erasmus+ Programme. Their work and endeavours to position themselves on the map of youth work, non-formal education and youth policymaking is seen as continuous and steadily progressing from one year to another. Ukrainian youth organisations were also mentioned for their continuous work and for sending a great number of young people to international events.

One EU delegate believed that progress was made concerning **women's participation in political life** based on the online events attended by EaP organisations. However, the delegate did not clearly mention which EaP countries were involved.

Two respondents stated they could not make any general assessments about the progress in EaP countries given that their work was seriously disrupted by the pandemic.

Main challenges for EaP civil society organisations

Most EU delegates in WG4 referred to four main challenges that EaP civil society organisations had to deal with in 2021: political crises, shrinking space for civil society, the impossibility of organizing in-person activities because of the pandemic, and funding.

The political crisis in Belarus remains the major concern in the region. Many NGOs in Belarus were forced to close down, which impacted the joint cooperation projects they had with organisations in the EaP region and the EU. A great number of civic activists left the country and moved to other countries in the region e.g., Ukraine. For that reason, organisations like DVV International tried to develop projects that involved the Belarusian diaspora, and to get the support of the EU Delegation to Belarus.

Another organisation working with Belarus – Frilans Syd – stated that one major challenge and concern, at the same time, was the lack of safe digital communication channels with professionals in Belarus. On the one hand, even though organisations and professionals (especially journalists) in Sweden are willing to offer assistance, they are not sure which channels to use. On the other hand, people in Belarus are not aware of the support that their counterparts in Sweden are ready to provide.

Another major issue mentioned by respondents was the **conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan**. According to three EU delegates who were implementing projects in the two countries, the war and post-war crisis were highly disruptive of their regional networking and cooperation activities.

Given the political context in the region, the **space for civil society is shrinking**. Aside from the sweeping closure of NGOs in Belarus, EU delegates referred to countries like Georgia where the Government tried to damage the image and credibility of NGOs or Azerbaijan, where the law that restricted NGOs' access to international funding left very little space for civic organisations' voice and activities. Another example came from one EU delegate who worked with NGOs involved in reconciliation work in Armenia, and referred to the Armenia-Azerbaijan war during which the value and impact of the work done by civic activists was seriously questioned and criticized.

Almost half of the EU delegates considered the **impossibility of organizing in-person events, meetings or site visits** because of the pandemic to be a major barrier that added to the pre-existing struggles of civil society organisations. The representative of one youth organisation said that the lack of in-person interaction seriously impacted the youth participation rate, and made outreach to different youth groups extremely challenging.

When it came to **funding**, EU delegates mentioned few funding opportunities, the lack of skills of some organisations in the EaP region to raise funding, but also the delays occurred due to how funding agencies managed the grant-making process. One relevant example was given by an EU delegate from Sweden who said that the organisation's projects with Belarus could not continue in 2021 because the funding agency – ForumCiv – extended the project closure procedure, and organisations were not allowed to apply for new grants during this whole time. Another comment, in terms of funding, referred to the high travel costs from Europe to Eastern Partnership countries (e.g., Armenia) when implementing youth exchange projects under the Erasmus+ Programme. One EU delegate considered this to be a challenge that asked for a revision of the travel grants offered by the European Commission within the frame of the Programme.

When asked **how the EaP CSF could assist organisations in overcoming challenges**, some of the EU delegates suggested the following:

- To facilitate activities that encourage travel in the EaP region (the EU delegate who made this suggestion gave the example of a successful tour of tolerance organized in conflict-affected countries in the Balkans); the Forum's role could be to provide support with contacts in the region and a better understanding of the national contexts of the EaP countries;
- To reach out to and establish cooperation with more organisations in the EaP region;
- To influence to a greater extent EU policymaking in relation to EaP national governments and facilitate governments' return to a collaborative mode (the EU delegate who made this suggestion gave the example of Ukraine and Georgia where the extreme polarization between the ruling party and the opposition seriously impacted civil society and put human rights and watchdog organisations at great risk);
- To facilitate the setting up of institutionalized mechanisms for involvement of civil society organisations in the EaP countries (one EU delegate gave the example of Moldova and Ukraine where the so-called Public Councils were created as an organized form of dialogue that allows public authorities to invite and consult with civil society organisations on different issues);
- To facilitate the organisation of meetings in safe places for key persons that are in exile (e.g., members of the Belarusian Association of Journalists);
- To provide financial support, information resources, and to facilitate participation of experts.

Priorities for National Working Groups in 2022

Half of the EU delegates who answered the questionnaire referred to **youth-related priorities** such as: empowering youth for building their own future and for actively engaging in community/public life (one EU delegate considered this to be a priority especially that 2022 will be the European Year of Youth), social inclusion of youth with disabilities, creating civic spaces for youth, reinforcing cooperation with organisations in the EaP region and beyond, and strengthening the Erasmus+ Programme which is key to the EaP-EU cooperation; capacity building of youth organisations in the

EaP region and encouraging them to seize funding opportunities available; enhancing youth mobility and motivating young people to connect.

Other priorities mentioned by delegates were digital literacy, employment and workplace security.

Two EU delegates considered that **priorities should be rather set for the EU and its member countries** and called for more pragmatic and strategic actions in the region in all of the fields covered by WG4, as well as democracy, human rights, and security issues.

Two EU delegates referred to the **case of Belarus**, in particular. One delegate emphasized that the priorities should be: to unite civil society organisations on the political agenda of the pro-European orientation; to help civil society organisations to survive, preserve communities, and find new forms of cooperation despite the de facto ban on civil society activities; to support communication between civic activists who stayed in the country and those who emigrated; to participate in the creation of new proto-institutions of public governance in various fields. The other EU delegate said that safe digital communication channels are ground zero for any cooperation and assistance in the near future.

One EU delegate believed that **strengthening national adult education systems** should be a priority for all EaP countries. The main argument brought to the forefront was that adults in these countries did not receive proper civic education in school given the Soviet regime. Therefore, this major knowledge gap needs to be addressed through non-formal education programs implemented by both civil society organisations and national governments. In this respect, the EU delegate stated that National Platforms should advocate for national programs funded by governments and mentioned Germany as a best practice example for its Federal Agency and 16 State Agencies for Civic Education.

According to EU delegates, **the role of EU-based organisations in supporting WGs and National Platforms** in EaP countries for achieving the priorities above described mainly comes down to:

- Knowledge transfer to and experience sharing with civil society organisations in EaP countries;
- Facilitating connections with EU policies and programs and developing partnerships;
- Communicating the importance of involving youth from the EaP region to EU institutions (especially in the case of member-based youth organisations);
- Guiding and coordinating local processes in EaP countries e.g., local consultations regarding civic spaces for youth, co-management, policy and advocacy;
- Acting as a voice for network members in the EaP region and in each EaP country (in the case of member-based youth organisations);
- Raising awareness about the struggles of civil society organisations and organizing support from professionals/organisations outside EaP countries;
- In the case of Belarus, active involvement in EU policy-making concerning support to civil society in Belarus, supporting the formation of coalitions and policy work of organisations, providing assistance to various communities in their search for goals and effective ways of working given the current situation in the country.

One EU delegate said that the pandemic made it difficult for her to understand how the WG worked and that there was a lot of information to handle, thus making the role of EU organisations a bit unclear.

Recommendations to EaP civil society organisations

Most recommendations made by EU delegates referred to developing and implementing joint projects, advocacy and policy-making. Regarding projects, several delegates stressed that the CSF should be an opportunity for member organisations to learn about the needs and work of their peers in the region, but also a context for setting up partnerships and coming up with practical projects to address the issues tackled. When referring to policy-making, delegates emphasized the importance of establishing a strong connection between grassroots and policy-making organisations, the need to involve excellent professionals in policy work, and to develop evidence-based proposals that clearly explain how problems can be solved. The one common thread to almost all recommendations made by EU delegates was the idea of acting together.

Main recommendations to EaP civil society organisations

- To use the CSF and the WG to learn more about other CSOs and their needs, and to develop practical projects and programmes to jointly address these needs (“Not only talking, but also acting together.”)
- To develop strong relationships with EaP and EU organisations
- To involve in policymaking professionals and organisations that have the competences and skills for policy work, and to ensure a strong connection between grassroots organisations and organisations engaged in policymaking
- To draft policy proposals that are evidence-based and clearly show how the problems can be solved (e.g., based on demonstration of benefits, calculation of return on investment, best practices) in order to determine authorities to consider the proposals made
- To not hesitate to put their issues on the CSF and EU agendas as EU stakeholders are not always aware of the issues civil society organisations in EaP countries are confronted with (“Push the Secretariats of the networks you are part to push for you!”)
- To overcome differences, focus more on finding common ground, and form networks/coalitions in order to speak with a stronger voice at national, regional and EU level (“Alone we are weak.”)
- To advocate for more inclusion in EU policies and programmes covering WG4 topics (e.g., Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps)
- To focus more on healthcare, education, human rights, media freedom, women empowerment, and strengthening the role of civil society organisations in the region, given the human rights and democracy challenges that the pandemic brought to the region

- To remember their own interests and to diversify funding sources for not depending on any donors
- To bring fresh people and communities to their organisations, networks and coalitions
- To focus more on reducing the impact of climate change
- To include youth in community/public life to a greater extent
- To be more proactive

Key messages for the 2021 EaP Summit

The key messages formulated by EU delegates ahead of the EU summit addressed EaP civil society organisations, EU policymakers, or both groups.



Working together is the strength of our communities, countries and organisations. We can reach our goals and make positive changes in the region only if we truly support each other and work with one another.

Keep your strong voice and keep going!

Together we are stronger to defend our human rights!

EaP is partnership between the EU and all 6 EaP countries, and mutual respect and dialogue should be an important aspect of this partnership.

Think new formats of governance and influence their development in the EaP countries and region, so that the role of civil society in responding to current challenges can be the key one.

There are not enough clear statements and actions concerning the abuse against journalists in Belarus.

Listen to people and do something about it! The EC should develop a relationship of trust with project beneficiaries in order to allow them to voice their concerns and to enable both parties to work together on finding solutions.

If what someone says sounds simple, then that's the voice you should be listening to.

More focus on inclusion of youth in decision-making at all levels!

Let's listen to the young generation more often.



Conclusions

The **objectives** set by national WGs in 2021 varied significantly depending on the context in each country. Most goals were related to youth and education, while the most underrepresented field was research and innovation (the only WG that mentioned goals in this field was the one in Ukraine). The achievement of goals was mostly average. The Georgian and Ukrainian WGs were the only ones that also mentioned objectives reached to a large extent, whereas Armenia placed itself at the low achievement end of the spectrum. Some of the reasons that triggered poor achievement were political uncertainty (Moldova), repressive political regime (Belarus), post-war crisis (Armenia), and the pandemic.

In terms of **achievements**, most National Coordinators referred to attending meetings organized by different Ministries and Parliamentary Committees, position papers and official statements in relation to actions of national stakeholders, organizing events and conducting research in the fields covered by WG4. Three countries had notable achievements in terms of influencing national stakeholders' actions in 2021 – Armenia (the Film Law was adopted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia on May 7, 2021, following the work and advocacy of WG 4 member organisations), Moldova (WG4's recommendations on the National Youth Strategy for 2021-2025 were included in the strategy evaluation report and the setting up of a National Youth Agency was recognized as a priority by the Government), Ukraine (the WG's proposals on digital transformation in the fields of education and science were taken into consideration by the Ministry for Education and Science). In Belarus, no achievements were reported given the political situation in the country.

Besides the pandemic that was mentioned by nearly all EaP countries, the biggest **challenges** faced by WGs in 2021 were: limited funding and post-war crisis (Armenia), the lack of accurate statistical data at the national level and impossibility of applying for international funding (Azerbaijan), repressive political regime (Belarus), political uncertainty and dissatisfactory participation of some of the member organisations (Moldova), poor activity rate of public organisations and EU's formal responses to the WG's suggestions (Ukraine).

Opportunities for civil society to actively engage in policy development in 2021 were positively assessed by Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine. Fewer opportunities existed in Moldova, given the uncertain political situation, and in Azerbaijan where civil society organisations are struggling to keep their activities afloat despite not having access to international funds.

In terms of monitoring the implementation of national reforms, in the fields covered by WG4, most respondents answered that this was the responsibility of the member organisations which were active in the respective fields.

All National Coordinators (except the one in Belarus who didn't have enough information) reported a high level of interest and participation in the **EaP architecture meetings**, even though WGs had no specific tools to monitor the number of events attended or the number of WG representatives who attended. WG members positively evaluated their participation in the meetings.

All WGs set **priorities** in the field of education for 2022, and most WGs focused on youth and culture to a great extent. When asked how the EaP CSF could help with achieving priorities, National Coordinators referred to financial support, but also to bringing EaP issues to the EU table and influencing policy-making.

When asked to rate **member organisations' interest and activity** on a scale from 1 to 5, five National Coordinators considered members' engagement to be rather average (3). The National Coordinator in Azerbaijan was the only one who rated members' engagement higher (4).

The solutions proposed to engage members more in the WGs ranged from providing financial support to modifying the National Platform's internal regulations in order to allow for the exclusion of inactive organisations or asking organisations to include their activities in the annual advocacy plan of the WG in order to keep them motivated and active.

In terms of **financial resources** used by member organisations for implementing their projects in the EaP region, most Coordinators pointed to EU programmes (despite limited access to some of these programmes e.g., Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps), but also to donors such as the German Marshall Fund, the United Nations Population Fund, EaP CSF, and own resources.

All National Coordinators considered that **the visibility and position of National Platforms** in relation to national and EU policymakers should be consolidated, whereas five out of six Coordinators stated that the role and involvement of EU member organisations in WG4 should be strengthened. More precisely, National Coordinators would like EU organisations to share more of their knowledge and experience in the WG4 fields, and to involve EaP organisations in their projects to a greater extent.

According to the answers provided by 10 out of 16 EU delegates in WG4, the main **work done by EU member organisations** in the EaP countries in 2021 addressed fields such as youth, culture, social entrepreneurship, adult education, gender issues, healthcare, freelance journalism.

The main **progress** that EU delegates saw in the EaP countries they worked with, in the fields covered by WG4, mainly referred to strengthened cooperation with EU/EaP organisations, digitalization and increased adaptability to the post-pandemic working environment. The most positive assessments were made about organisations and national contexts in Moldova and Armenia (especially concerning youth work and adult education). EU delegates stated it was difficult to talk about progress in Belarus, but the awareness raised among organisations and professionals outside Belarus about the situation in the country was an important accomplishment.

Most EU delegates identified four main **challenges** that EaP civil society organisations had to deal with in 2021: political crises (the political crisis in Belarus and the post-war problems in Armenia), the impossibility of organizing in-person activities because of the pandemic, the shrinking space for civil society, and funding (scarce funding, lack of fundraising skills, delays occurred due to how funding agencies managed the grant-making process).

When asked about the areas that WGs in EaP countries should focus on in 2022, half of all EU delegates referred to youth-related **priorities**. Other priorities mentioned were strengthening national adult education systems, digital literacy, employment and workplace security, helping civil society organisations to find new forms of cooperation in Belarus. Several EU delegates considered that priorities should be rather set for the EU and its member countries, and mentioned more pragmatic and strategic actions in the region in all of the fields covered by WG4.

In the opinion of EU delegates, **the role of EU-based organisations** in supporting WG4/ National Platforms in EaP countries mainly came down to knowledge transfer to and experience sharing with EaP organisations, advocating for greater inclusion of EaP organisations in EU policies and programmes, guiding and coordinating local processes in EaP countries (in the case of member-based

organisations), raising awareness about the challenges faced by EaP civil society organisations and organizing support.

Most **recommendations** made by EU delegates to EaP civil society organisations in WG4 referred to developing and implementing joint projects, advocacy and policy-making. Regarding projects, several delegates stressed that the Forum should be an opportunity for member organisations to learn about the needs and work of their peers in the region, but also a context for setting up partnerships and coming up with practical projects to address the issues tackled. When referring to policy-making, delegates emphasized the importance of establishing a strong connection between policy makers and field realities, the need to involve excellent professionals in policy work and to develop evidence-based proposals that clearly explain how problems can be solved. The one common thread to almost all recommendations made by EU delegates was the idea of acting together.

The **key messages** formulated by both National Coordinators and EU delegates ahead of the EU summit addressed EU policymakers, EaP civil society organisations, the EaP CSF or all groups. Many messages stressed the importance of working together or called for more pragmatic actions in the region.

The report was compiled by Ana Claudia Leu, EaP CSF WG4 Consultant

Annexes

Questionnaire for National Working Group 4 Coordinators

To be answered by National Working Group 4 Coordinators at the level of each National Platform.

The reporting period this questionnaire refers to is 2021.

Country

Name

Organisation.....

Questions on policy development, policy dialogue and advocacy at the national and EU level

Q1. What were the main objectives of the National Platform in your country in 2021, in the fields covered by Working Group 4 “Contacts between People”?

.....

Q2. For each objective above, to which extent do you think it was met?

| | To a large extent | To a moderate extent | To a little extent | To no extent |
|--------------------|-------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| Objective 1 | | | | |
| Objective 2 | | | | |
| | | | | |

If little or no extent, what do you think are the main reasons for the low achievement level?

.....

Q3. What were your Working Group’s main achievements on policy dialogue in 2021?

At the national level (Please refer to legislative and policy changes, official statements, and other tangible actions by your country’s official stakeholders that occurred based on recommendations, inputs and advocacy of the EaP CSF)

.....

At EU level (e.g., Provide brief information on priority areas of engagement, position papers, bilateral dialogue with EU institutions, event statements and other actions)

.....

Q4. What were the main challenges to the activities carried out by your Working Group in 2021?

How have you attempted to overcome these?

At the national level

.....

At EU level

.....

Q5. How many advocacy campaigns has your Working Group conducted (independently or together with other Forum structures) in 2021?

What have been the main advocacy outcomes (if possible, please elaborate on specific criteria used to evaluate success)?

Please provide an answer based on the activities included in your Working Group advocacy matrix (whenever in place), and/or any existing strategy at the level of your National Platform where the advocacy priorities for Working Groups are outlined.

.....

Q6. What have been the opportunities for the civil society in your country to actively engage in policy development in 2021 (i.e., participation in the Working Groups that elaborate draft laws/policies and in the public consultation processes)? Please provide some concrete examples.

.....

Q7. How do you monitor the implementation of reforms at national level, in the fields covered by your Working Group?

.....

Questions on participation in the EaP architecture meetings

Q8. How many Working Group representatives have participated in EaP Platforms and Panels, senior official meetings, conferences and/or other ministerial meetings? Based on participants' feedback, how do they evaluate the impact and usefulness of their participation in these meetings?

.....

Q9. How many events of the EaP architecture (EaP Platforms and Panels, EaPs senior official meetings, conferences and/or other ministerial meetings) have been attended by representatives of your Working Group? Please provide brief overview of their input to the meetings (e.g presentation, country update, speech or policy statement, input to discussions, etc.).

.....

Questions on future priorities, members engagement and cooperation

Q10. What areas should become a priority for your Working Group at the national level in 2022?

.....

Q11. What is the role of the EaP CSF in helping you achieve these priorities? In your opinion, should the role of the Working Group within the CSF architecture be strengthened?

.....

Q12. How would you rate your Working Group member organisations' level of interest and activity at national level? (1 is poor, 5 is excellent)

1 2 3 4 5

Q13. If the level mentioned is less than or equal to 3, what would be three major approaches to improve the activity rate of Working Group 4 member organisations in your country?

1.....

2.....

3.....

Q14. What are the main financial resources that member organisations in your Working Group use to fund their activities in the EaP region?

.....

Q15. In your opinion, is there a need to strengthen the visibility and the position of National Platforms in relation to national and EU policymakers?

Yes

No

If yes, please briefly elaborate on how potentially to strengthen dialogue, knowledge exchange and cooperation with Working Groups from other EaP countries and with EU members.

Q16. In your opinion, is there a need to strengthen the role and involvement of EU member organisations in the Working Group?

Yes

No

If yes, please briefly elaborate on how to better utilise their capacity and experience in your actions at national and EU level.

Q17. One key message you would like to convey in view of the 2021 EaP summit?

Questionnaire for EU Delegates

To be answered by representatives of EU member organisations in Working Group 4 “Contacts between People”.

The reporting period this questionnaire refers to is 2021.

Country

Name

Organisation

Q1. Please summarise the main areas of the work done by your organisation in the EaP countries in 2021

.....

Q2. Based on your work in the Eastern Neighborhood, what was the main progress made by the EaP countries you worked with in 2021, in the fields covered by Working Group 4 “Contacts between People”? (In case you worked with more than one EaP country, please break up your answer by country)

.....

Q3. Based on your work in the Eastern Neighborhood, what were the main challenges EaP civil society organisations were confronted with in 2021, in the areas covered by Working Group 4?

How could the EaP CSF assist you in overcoming these challenges? (In case you worked with more than one EaP country, please break up your answer by country)

.....

Q4. What areas should become a priority in the fields covered by your Working Group in 2022, for the National Platforms of the EaP countries you are working with?

.....

Q5. How do you see the role of your organisation in supporting Working Group 4 and/or National Platforms of EaP countries in strengthening policy dialogue at national and EU level?

.....

Q6. What would be three recommendations you would make to EaP civil society organisations that are active in the fields covered by your Working Group, in the EaP countries you are working with?

1.....

2.....

3.....

Q7. One key message you would like to convey in view of the 2021 EaP summit?