



VOICES FROM CIVIL SOCIETY: The Needs, Perspectives, and Challenges of the Eastern Partnership Program



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Chisinau, Moldova, April 2018, 2021. Demonstration for snap election.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since its inception in 2009, the Eastern Partnership initiative has offered an important roadmap for reform and closer integration with the European Union (EU) for six of its eastern neighbors: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. In recent years, however, different political dynamics have put the countries on increasingly diverging trajectories, leading to a crisis in the common policy approach. While Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine joined ranks to seek deeper ties with the EU, Armenia opted for a special relationship, Azerbaijan focused solely on economic integration, and Aliaksandr Lukashenka's regime suspended the country's participation in the program. Amidst the shifting political winds, it has been local civil society that has maintained a steady pro-European voice and consistently held their governments to account. Engaging over 250 civil society representatives from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, this report examines the current state of the countries' relations with the EU and provides sets of recommended priorities for future cooperation. To avoid becoming obsolete, the Eastern Partnership program needs to be updated to reflect the current conditions and to embrace a new, tailor-made approach towards each and every of the involved member states, underpinned by the European Union's values and mutual cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

It has been 12 years since a Polish-Swedish initiative, during the Czech presidency of the European Union (EU) Council, set up the Eastern Partnership (EaP). It is a comprehensive support program that aims to bring six eastern neighbors: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine closer to the EU. Designed as an extension of the European Neighborhood policy, the framework offers a roadmap for reform and deeper economic cooperation between the EU and the involved states.

It has achieved some remarkable successes in some countries and has had more mixed results in others. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have signed the Association Agreements that included visa-liberalization deals which will soon allowed their citizens to travel visa-free to the Schengen area. Armenia, acknowledging its close relationship with Russia, ratified a less ambitious yet still important Comprehensive and Advanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

Five years into the program, Azerbaijan took a major step back by curtailing basic political freedoms at home, yet it has still managed to bring its economic relations with the EU to a new level. Belarus, compared to its peers, largely remained an outlier, but at some moments it appeared open to dialogue and willing to deepen ties with Brussels.

The last two years, however, broke the cautious optimism that all six countries were on the right trajectory.

First, the fraudulent presidential election in August 2020 sparked massive demonstrations in Belarus and threw the country into turmoil. After the EU imposed sanctions on President Alexander Lukashenko's regime in response to unprecedented level of state-backed violence and detentions of protesters and civil society activists, Belarus dropped out of the Eastern Partnership.

Several months later, another crisis emerged in the neighborhood. A war broke out between two EaP members, Azerbaijan and Armenia, over Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas, which shattered the fragile peace in the region and reshaped the geopolitical dynamics. It also revealed the weakness of EU diplomacy and showed the bloc's incapability in helping to prevent frozen conflicts from turning into 'hot' armed clashes.

On top of strengthening Russia's hand in the region, the war brought Armenia's post-revolutionary government to the verge of collapse and strengthened the autocratic tendencies in Azerbaijan.

In neighboring Georgia, which has long been seen as a success story of EU engagement in the region, a deep political crisis occurred that shook the country following its contested parliamentary elections in October 2020 that have yet to be resolved.

Ukraine, embroiled in a seven-year war on its eastern territories with Russia-backed separatists, is facing an uncertain future due to Moscow's ongoing provocations and the buildup of troops near its borders.

Despite the challenges in the implementation of reform, only Moldova has recently appeared to paint a more optimistic picture.

With the COVID-19 pandemic taking lives, hitting hard the economies of all of these countries and amidst the shifting political winds, there are a growing number of uncertainties lying ahead about the future of the Eastern Partnership program and its members' relations with the EU.

But against the backdrop of evolving politics, civil society in the EaP countries has remains the backbone of the pro-EU voices in the region. Although civil society organizations (CSOs) face problems of their own, and – in some countries – increased persecution, they have been an important driver of reforms and continue to hold their respective governments to account.

By giving voice to representatives of CSOs in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, this

report aims to take stock of the current state of the Eastern Partnership in each of the countries, by examining the needs, challenges, and future prospects of each of them.

To do so, the research used to compile this report combined online questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and five round table events, which involved civil society representatives from across a variety of fields and different geographical locations. The content of this report draws from the collected **217 survey responses**, hours of group discussions, and **25** individual interviews.

In light of the political developments over the last year in Belarus and Aliaksandr Lukashenka regime's subsequent withdrawal from the program, this country has not been included as a part of this assessment.

METHODOLOGY

To assess the situation on the ground and collect responses from civil society, four methods were used: round table discussions, semi-structured interviews, online surveys, and complimentary desk-research.

In Armenia and Moldova, the round table discussions were conducted in Yerevan and Chisinau, respectively, and brought together members of the National Platform, youth activists, and other civil society members from across different fields and regions, who discussed the challenges and opportunities connected to their countries' participation in the Eastern Partnership program.

Due to the COVID-19 situation, in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine, the events were held online, however, they still followed the same methodology.

To keep the discussion inclusive, each event involved from **up to six** local civil society representatives, bringing the total number of round table participants to **25**.

Additionally, a total of **25 semi-structured interviews** with selected CSO activists and members of think-tanks from across the countries were conducted online and/or offline.

To gather data from a broader segment of civil society, including those with limited foreign language skills, an online survey was launched in national languages. Consisting of 17 closed and 3 open-ended questions, **the survey collected responses from 217 representatives of local civil society across five countries**: Armenia (45), Azerbaijan (48), Georgia (41), Moldova (48), and Ukraine (35). A snowball method was used for sampling.

In Azerbaijan, most of the respondents who participated in the survey were men (72%). The imbalance reflects the actual situation in the country's civil society sector, where women – largely due to conservative attitudes and discouragement about participating in public life - still constitute a minority.

Some 70% of all respondents were in their twenties and thirties, and only 12% indicated their age as over 55.

In terms of geographical diversity, the bulk of responses (over 80%) in Azerbaijan came from Baku, others from Ganja, Tovuz, and Barda. With most of NGOs and movements situated in the capital city, activism is rather limited across the regions. On top of demographic and economic reasons (Baku's metro area is inhabited by over 4 million people which constitute nearly half of the country's population), there are also political factors that come into play. Civil society operating in the regions is typically subject to

deeper surveillance and scrutiny by local authorities which makes it more difficult to conduct independent activities without attracting the attention of the government.

The type of organizations represented by the respondents varied from registered NGOs to un-registered groups, informal social movements, youth initiatives, think tanks, and local community representatives. However, due to the issues with the registration of CSOs, nearly one-third of all respondents (29.27%) indicated some affiliation with non-registered entities which represents the highest number across all surveyed countries.

In Armenia, the number of female respondents (73%) was significantly higher than men (27%), partially corresponding to the situation in the civil society sector where women constitute the majority.

Regarding the age distribution, the majority of respondents belonged to the youngest age category - 16-29 (51%), followed by 30-39 year-olds (20%), 50+ (18%) and 40-55 year-olds (11%).

Concerning the legal status of the participating CSO representatives, 85% of the respondents were registered NGOs and 5% were from non-registered initiatives. The rest represented community centers, a think-tank, and a foundation. The registration process for non-profits is quite easy in Armenia, typically taking not more than 10 days upon the submission of all relevant documentation.

With regards to the geographical distribution of the respondents, 27% were based in the capital city of Yerevan, 73% were based in regional CSOs, out of which only 12% came from villages, and the rest resided in towns with a population ranging from 5000 up to 120,000 inhabitants.

In terms of other indicators, 38% of the respondents indicated youth/community-building as their main area of work, while the rest represented education (18%), human rights, social rights (9%), gender equality (7%), public policy (7%), environment/climate, and animal rights (6%), democracy/rule of law/elections (4%), anti-corruption, transparency, budgetary oversight, and other areas (9%).

In the case of Georgia, 63% of the survey participants were women and 34% men, and one respondent preferred to keep their gender identities undefined. The percentages in this distribution mirrors the dominance of women in Georgia's third sector. In addition, it is directly connected to the geographical representation of the participants in the study as a larger proportion of respondents were affiliated with regional organizations, which were founded and run by women.

As for the age distribution, the bulk of the respondents in Georgia (46%) belonged to the age group of 30-39 years, followed by the youth category of 16-29 (24%) and people aged 40-55 (27%).

When it comes to the geographical location, 37% of respondents were based in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi, and the rest resided in other cities and towns across the country (Batumi, Kutaisi, Bolnisi, among others).

With regards to the legal status of organizations, the majority of survey participants (90%) were registered non-governmental organizations. In Georgia, registering an NGO is a very easy procedure and usually CSOs are able to be formally filed within their first months of establishment. In addition, social movement, initiative group and trade unions participated in the survey as well.

The survey included representatives of a variety of organizations. A relatively large proportion of them worked in field of human rights/social rights, gender equality, environment/climate, animal rights, education, youth and community-building, and social services. It's also notable that most of the organizations indicated having multiple areas of focus, as the fields noted above were interlinked with each other.

In Moldova, 64.% of the survey respondents were women and 34% men. 3% declined to reveal their gender. In fact, the numbers correspond to the situation on the ground, where women constitute the majority in the country's non-profit sector.

In terms of the age breakdown, 48% of the respondents were between 30-39 years-old, 44% are in the

40-55 and 55+ categories, and only 8% were between 16-29 years-old.

Concerning the geographical distribution, 31% of the respondents were based in the capital city of Chisinau and the others were located in cities and towns across the countries, including Balti, Drochia, Comrat, and others.

93% of respondents classified as “NGOs with a legal status”. The high number is likely a consequence of the approval of the Law on Non-Commercial Organizations in 2020, which has significantly simplified the registration process for NGOs. Nevertheless, unlike in other countries within the regional framework (for example, in Georgia), individual persons in Moldova cannot get any funds unless they are applying through registered partnering entities. Thus, the mentioned fact could serve as basis for the “mushrooming” of registered NGOs.

27% of the NGOs indicated youth and community development as their main fields of activity, followed by 10% of representatives working in human rights and 10% from the women’s rights sector. Other respondents represented various other fields, from media and anti-corruption to education and urban activities.

In Ukraine, 57% of the survey participants were women and 40% were men, while 3% declined to reveal their gender.

Most of the respondents belonged to the age category 30-39, followed by the 40-55 years-old (34 %). 11% of survey participants marked their age as 55+, and two belonged to the youth category (16-29 years-old).

With the regards to geographical distribution, 37% of respondents said they were based in the capital city of Kyiv, while the rest indicated other major cities as their place of residence (Cherkasy, Sumy, Krematorsk, Vinnica, and others).

As for the legal status of organizations represented by the survey participants, vast majority of those were fully registered NGOs (87 %). One participant indicated an affiliation with a think tank and three more marked “the other” category.

Similar to other survey countries, the respondents represented a variety of fields, ranging from human

ARMENIA

Yerevan, Armenia, April 2018. Protest against former president Serzh Sargsyan's candidacy for Prime Ministry.
Credit: Hetq, Am, Narek Aleksanyan.





rights, media organizations, trade unions, to CSOs focused on education, working with youth, and anti-corruption groups.

ARMENIA

National Context

With its complex geopolitical and security situation, Armenia, a small republic sandwiched between Europe and Asia, has long been forced to do a careful political balancing act between the West and East.

Although the country initially sought a closer relationship with the European Union and was seemingly set to sign an Association Agreement, negotiations for a more ambitious deal were abandoned after President Serzh Sarkisyan unexpectedly withdrew from the talks and Yerevan agreed to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union.

Instead, in November 2017, Armenia and the EU signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). CEPA, which came into force in 2021, aims to deepen ties in a wide array of sectors from the economy and transportation to climate issues, judiciary, the rule of law and democracy. It also entails assistance in the country's domestic reform agenda.

Though it does not include the removal of tariff barriers between the EU and Armenia, the special partnership deal is important for Yerevan. Representing a political middle ground between the country's membership in the Eurasian Union and the full-scale cooperation that an Association Agreement would offer, CEPA showed that it was possible to combine the two geopolitical directions.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Armenia's economy in 2020, the EU offered the country a substantial package of assistance. The 92-million EUR aid package from Brussels to curb the outbreak of the novel coronavirus was a welcomed move, especially in light of the fact that there was no significant amount of financial support in sight coming from Moscow¹.

However, the COVID-19 crisis soon became a side issue for Armenia once renewed armed clashes erupted in Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding areas in the fall of 2020. The conflict, simmering since the Moscow-brokered ceasefire of 1994 that ended a bloody war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory, entered a new hot phase after Azerbaijan launched a military attack to regain the territories lost in the early nineties². Seemingly taken by surprise, Yerevan soon started suffering significant military setbacks while Azerbaijan, supported by modern drone technology from Turkey, made quick advances. Moscow, Armenia's military ally, stayed silent in the first days of the war despite the pleas for help from Yerevan.

Eventually, however, the 44-day brutal war which killed some 7,000 people on both sides and resulted in tens of thousands wounded³, ended with a Kremlin-brokered ceasefire which also became a side to the

1 Sammut, D. (2020). "Two Years after the Velvet Revolution, Armenia Needs the EU More than Ever." European Policy Center. Retrieved online from: <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Two-years-after-the-Velvet-Revolution-Armenia-needs-the-EU-more-than-33e910>

2 Internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan and inhabited by a majority of Armenian population, the Nagorno-Karabakh region was part of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. It has been under the control of ethnic Armenian forces since 1994.

3 Isayev H.; Mejlumyan, A. (2021). Armenia, Azerbaijan Mark One-Year Anniversary of War. Eurasianet. Retrieved online from: <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-azerbaijan-mark-one-year-anniversary-of-war>

agreement. Armenia lost the seven regions surrounding it kept under occupation as a buffer zone since 1994 and lost control over parts of the Nagorno-Karabakh area itself. The tripartite ceasefire included the deployment of 2,000 Russian peacekeeping soldiers in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin Corridor, with plans to keep them there until at least 2025. The deal also envisioned the establishment of a new transport connection between Azerbaijan and its exclave, the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, overseen by Russian troops.

The painful military was a rude wake-up call for Armenia and led to political turmoil in the country, threatening to unravel some of the political gains of the 2018 Velvet Revolution. The government of Nikol Pashinyan, who assumed the leadership of the country following the peaceful street protests two years before, was blamed by the opposition and parts of the general public for premature capitulation and teetered on the brink of collapse⁴.

Finally, for Armenia, the involvement of Turkey in the war, given their historically tragic relations, was seen as problematic and heightened fears about Armenia's security as Ankara assumed a more active and influential role in the region.

Counterintuitively, however, the shifting geopolitics may eventually help Yerevan to reconcile with its powerful neighbor in the long run. Despite the unfavorable optics, Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have both expressed a willingness to normalize relations and begin rapprochement talks⁵.

Amidst the one-year anniversary of the war, however, the situation in Armenia still appears shaky. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is far from being resolved as Azerbaijan and Armenia have not restored diplomatic relations and ceasefire breaches continue to take place. A comprehensive peace agreement that would put an end to the dispute is still being negotiated as Yerevan, which among other points, seeks a special status for the Karabakh region inhabited by the population of 145,000 people, 95% of whom are ethnic Armenians⁶.

To help civilians affected in the conflict and ensure the demining of populated areas, the European Commission has contributed over 17 million EUR in humanitarian assistance⁷.

Furthermore, despite the November 2020 deal's provisions for the exchanging the prisoners of war, according to the Armenian government, at least 125 Armenians have been still held by Azerbaijan, though Baku claims the number of captives is three times lower and demands that Armenia handover a map of the remaining land mines first⁸.

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the 2020 war, the political clout of the OSCE Minsk Group which had led the mediation process between the two sides since the mid-nineties, has been significantly reduced in favor of Russia.

Moscow remains one of the group's co-chairs, but with its outdated structure and modes of operation, the Minsk Group, according to some observers, is sliding into irrelevance⁹. However, according to a March 2021 opinion poll conducted by the Caucasus Regional Research Center Armenia (CRRCA), 49% of

4 Mejlumyan, A. Kuchera, J. "Armenian Government Under Attack Following War Defeat." Eurasianet. Retrieved online from: <https://eurasianet.org/armenian-government-under-attack-following-war-defeat>

5 Yackley, A. (2021). "Turkey Reaches Out to Foe Armenia in Drive for Caucasus Influence." The Financial Times. Retrieved online from: <https://www.ft.com/content/c370a933-98be-4abb-9c93-93424e824a7f>

6 Schreck, C. (2014). "Explainer: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Retrieved online from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/background-nagorno-karabakh/26514813.html>

7 (2021). "Nagorno Karabakh Conflict: EU Allocates Additional 10 Million EUR to Support Those Affected." Press Release. European Commission." Retrieved online from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_2462

8 Cookman, L. (2021). "Are Azerbaijan and Armenia Ready to Improve Relations?" Al Jazeera. Retrieved online from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/15/are-azerbaijan-and-armenia-ready-to-improve-relations>

9 Cutler, R (2021). "The Minsk Group is Meaningless." Foreign Policy. Retrieved online from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/23/armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-osce-minsk-group-meaningless/>

Armenian respondents still considered the overall role of the OSCE Minsk Group in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as “very important” or “rather important.”¹⁰

Meanwhile, owing to its increasingly influential position after the war, Russia continues to play an even stronger role in Armenia’s domestic and foreign policy, and is still perceived as the guarantor of the country’s security.

At the same time, however, the EU has maintained its role as Armenia’s “key reform partner”¹¹. Although security issues still top the agenda, the government of Nikol Pashinyan, which renewed its mandate by holding snap elections in June 2021, has pledged a number of domestic reforms. To support the process, the European Union pledged to provide Armenia with a record breaking 2.6 billion EUR aid package. Throughout the next four years, extra investments will go into small and medium enterprises, the tech sector, transportation infrastructure, and energy efficiency¹².

The Pashinyan administration has also vowed to deal with corruption and conduct further reform of the electoral and judiciary systems. In Freedom House’s annual report “Freedom in the World,” Armenia is still assessed as “partly free,” with a score of 55 out of 100 points for political rights and civil liberties¹³.

Domestic challenges notwithstanding, Armenian CSOs are perceived as relatively strong. The latest USAID Sustainability Index ranks local civil society in second place within the Eurasian region of seven countries, preceded only by Ukraine¹⁴. The main issues faced by the sector are its dependency on foreign donors and financial sustainability, its limited organizational capacities, and a low level of public trust¹⁵. However, with the 2017 amendments to legislation, both NGOs and foundations are now able to engage in entrepreneurial activities and develop independent sources of funding.

10 (2021). “Public Perceptions in Armenia over the Settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict.” Civilnet. Retrieved online from: <https://www.civilnet.am/news/599811/the-overwhelming-majority-of-armenians-consider-return-of-captives-the-first-step-in-karabakh-conflict-settlement/?lang=en>

11 Avetisyan, A. (2021). “The EU and Armenia: Partners in Reform?” OC Media. Retrieved online from: <https://oc-media.org/features/the-eu-and-armenia-partners-in-reform/>

12 Ibidem

13 (2021). “Freedom of the World: Armenia.” Freedom House. Retrieved online from: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2021>

14 (2020). “2019 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index: Armenia.” USAID. Retrieved online from: <https://www.usaid.gov/armenia/news-information/news/2019-civil-society-organization-sustainability-index-cso-si-scores-released>

15 Zamejc, A.; Terzi, E.; Komm, T. “Under the Spotlight. A Close Look into the Emerging and Established Actors in Moldova and the South Caucasus.” People in Need. Retrieved online from: <https://www.peopleinneed.net/building-a-civil-society-in-moldova-and-the-south-caucasus-7994gp>

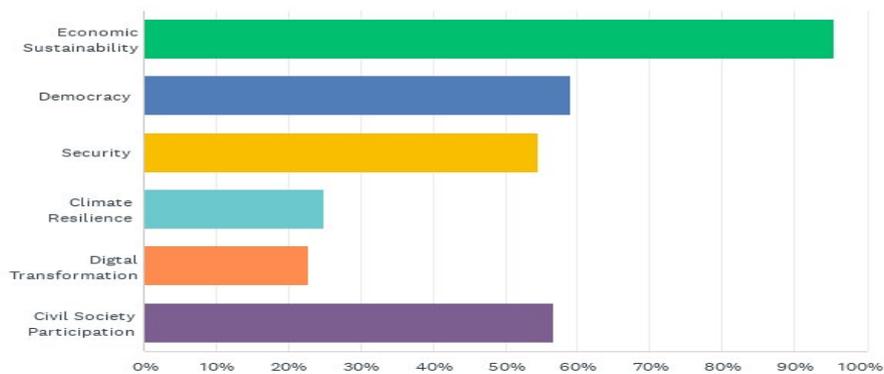
PART I

Survey Results

Conducted in the summer of 2021, the following online opinion survey was filled out by 45 representatives of Armenian civil society from across various fields. For more detailed demographic profiles, see the methodology chapter.

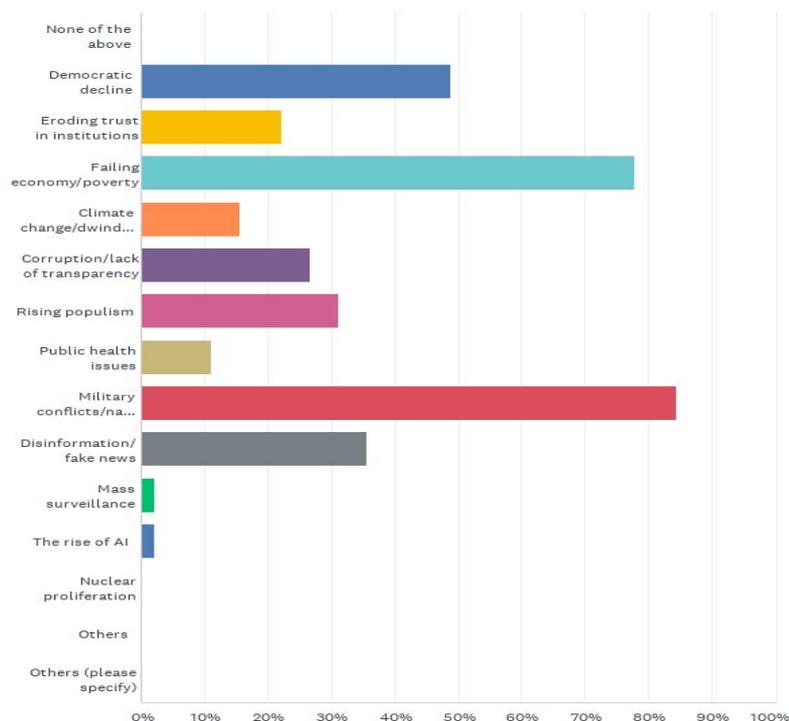
According to the survey results, the three priority areas for support from the EU in Armenia should be: economic sustainability (marked by a whopping 95.45%), democracy (59.09%), and civil society participation (56.82%) – followed closely by security (54.55%).

Q15 Which areas should the EU focus on more in your country? (choose max 3)



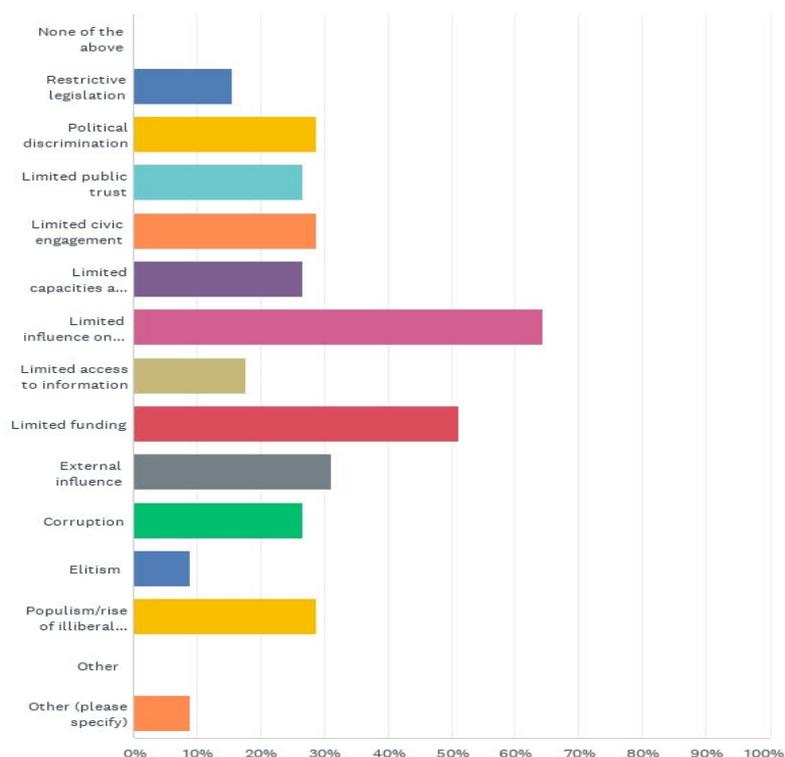
Survey participants also looked into the main challenges facing Armenia and among the top three were military conflicts/national security threats (84.44%), a failing economy/poverty (77.78%), and democratic decline (48.89%).

Q18 What do you see as the main challenge for your country in the future? (choose max 3)



With regards to the main issues of concern for the civil society sector itself, the majority of respondents pointed to its limited influence on policymaking (64.44%), insufficient funding (51.11%), and external influences (31.11%).

Q19 What do you see as the main challenges for civil society in your country? (choose max 3)



Asked how the EU could help address the challenges in the country, several respondents stressed the need to give more attention to regional CSOs and to provide support for the overall economic development of areas outside of the capital city.

“Provide bigger support to the projects especially aimed at the development of rural communities of remote regions, support the formation of local civil society institutions, build the capacities of regional youth,” commented one survey participant.

“Throughout the last 5-8 years, projects implemented by EU were mainly directed to the areas of Lori, Tavush, and Shirak, resulting in the unequal development among the regions. It is recommended to implement specific projects in the Aragatsotn and Ararat regions, where the civil society sector is weaker,” another CSO representative wrote.

Respondents also called on the EU to allocate resources to entrepreneurship activities, including opportunities for civil society to develop alternative sources of financing by creating their own social enterprises.

“Support CSOs for establishing enterprises, as well as support for the whole process of their development. Promote the implementation of economic projects which will enable CSOs and community members be more independent and self-sufficient,” one survey respondent said.

Other survey participants mentioned the need to foster youth engagement, democratization processes, and human rights by safeguarding civic space.

“[The EU could be more helpful] by not allowing the restricting of operations of CSOs as it is done in Belarus, Russian Federation and Azerbaijan,” one respondent commented.

Finally, several civil society representatives highlighted security issues, calling on the EU to do more to assist Armenia in freeing the prisoners of war and to support messages for peace.

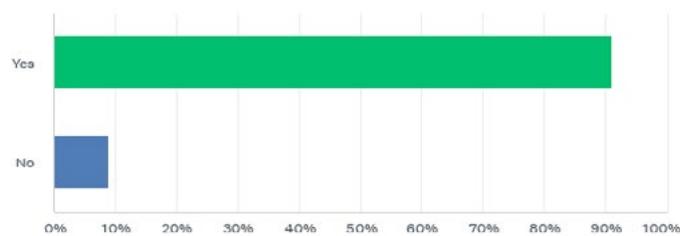
“EU countries should condemn the military actions and contribute to long-term peace in the region by supporting its economic recovery,” one survey participant wrote.

“[When one] hears about the EU, very often, we all think about money. Personally, I would not like that association to exist, I would like to think about the EU in the context of peace, security, and human rights protection,” another respondent concluded.

Awareness and Perception

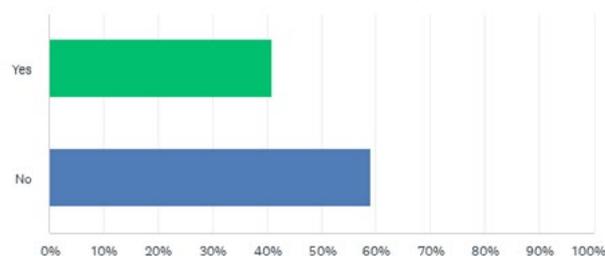
91.11% of civil society respondents said they were familiar with the Eastern Partnership program – a fairly consistent number across all surveyed countries.

Q9 Have you heard of the European Union's Eastern Partnership Initiative?



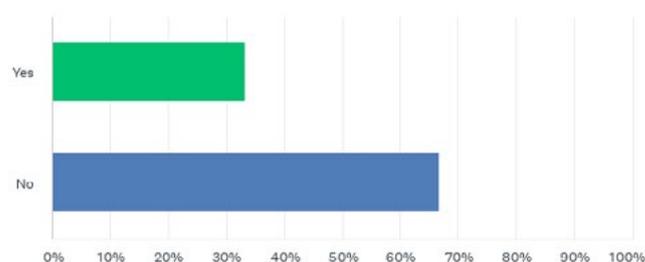
However, less than half of respondents (40.91%) were aware of the Eastern Partnership's new policy document.

Q12 Have you heard about the Eastern Partnership's policy framework "Beyond 2020"?



Also, only 33% of survey participants said they knew about the climate goal – the lowest number among the surveyed countries.

Q13 Have you heard about the Eastern Partnership's policy objective on climate resilience?



On a scale 1-5, the overall cooperation with the EU was assessed at 3.4 – which is the second highest result among the surveyed countries.

Q14 How would you assess the current state of cooperation between your country and the European Union within the framework of Eastern Partnership? (1 the lowest score; 5 the highest score)



PART II

Qualitative research, including round table discussions and extensive interviews with civil society representatives in Armenia, revealed a number of issues that pose a challenge for the sector’s operations, participation in the Eastern Partnership framework, and future impact.

Security Concerns and Shifting Geopolitics

With the unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the frequent renewal of hostilities along the contact line, Armenian civil society almost unanimously voiced its concerns about the country’s future and the potential threats to its sovereignty.

“The uncertainties about security hang over our heads and make it hard to concentrate on other things. Also, other members of the Eastern Partnership: Ukraine, Belarus – gave their strong support to Azerbaijan during the war,” commented one respondent, adding that it affected their sense of trust towards peers from those countries.

Representatives of civil society also acknowledged the increased role of Russia in Armenia’s domestic politics and foreign affairs. They were divided over the perception of its long-term impact, but most of them agreed that geopolitically, Armenia didn’t have much choice.

“We are hostages of Russia right now. We can fight Azerbaijan, but we cannot fight Russia,” said one respondent, arguing that Armenia’s fate is now, to a large extent, dependent on Moscow.

“Armenia’s best bet is returning to diplomacy in the conflict. Russia is here to stay and holds all the cards,” another respondent said. “In terms of security, we cannot get away from Russia. There are no EU flags at the border, there are Russian soldiers to protect the border.”

At the same time, there was recognition that achieving a long-lasting peace will require the return of multilateral diplomacy.

“What Armenia needs is a dignified peace. We don’t want peace dictated to us. We don’t have many resources for that though. Our biggest resource is the international community, so we are trying to work with all possible partners: Russia, Iran, the EU, China. We are also trying to talk to Turkey, and Azerbaijan, too, though it is not easy,” the respondent said. “Armenia has a desire for peace, but there is a lot of trauma, too.”

Policy Differentiation

Armenian civil society echoed its peers from other Eastern Partnership countries in advocating for increased tailoring of policies for each member state.

“Putting Armenia, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine in one basket with Belarus and Azerbaijan is problematic. It’s lowering expectations,” said one respondent who argued that Yerevan deserved higher benchmarks from Brussels.

According to some voices on the ground, the rising influence of Russia in Armenia was not an obstacle for an increased level of engagement from Europe.

“Counterintuitively, the EU became even more important for Armenia and there’s a window of opportunity for Brussels to step up its support for Armenia. Moscow will facilitate the engagement of the post-war strategy: the interests of the West and Russia align here. There is no relevant pro-Russian party currently and Russia doesn’t invest in soft power in Armenia,” argued a respondent.

“The fact that Armenia doesn’t voice European aspirations like Georgia or Moldova gives it a unique position and the country is well placed for development. Russia won’t try to put its foot in the door,” the respondent argued.

However, other representatives of civil society said that Europe must tread carefully if it wants to make a difference in Armenia.

“Right now, we are still managing to maintain autonomy with the relations with Brussels. But I see problems ahead. Russia has leverage to pressure us if they don’t like what we are doing with the EU,” a respondent commented.

EU Position

Although, Armenia’s civil society, in general, highly appreciated the EU’s role in supporting the third sector, in personal interviews and during the round table discussions, several representatives of civil society expressed their disappointments with the inconsistency of EU’s statements in reaction to development on the grounds.

“Europe’s position during the war disappointed many people in Armenia because Brussels didn’t do anything to stop the war. The clashes lasted 44 days and the EU couldn’t formulate a coherent message,” one respondent lamented.

On top of complaining about Europe’s insufficient support during the recent war over Nagorno-Karabakh, some activists said Western stakeholders, including EU member states, were perceived as increasingly silent and unwilling to comment on issues of concern and the violation of basic rights.

“When it comes to statements on human rights issues, Western embassies used to be more active before. Now local NGOs often struggle with whom to approach with these kinds of problems,” one respondent said.

Another civil society representative called on the EU to scale up the promotion of democratic values in Armenia.

“We need to draw more attention to the values struggle. There is a lot of money spent on the other side, right-wing radical propaganda, anti-human rights, targeting minorities. It must be countered, though in a more sophisticated way. Rather than saying that something is a lie, it is better to nurture open-minded communities, support cultural events that bring together young people, engaging rock stars, funding festivals. The EU was doing some of this, but not very efficiently,” a respondent commented.

Influence on Policymakers

Although Armenia's civil society is relatively vibrant, some of its representative said its potential was underutilized.

“Mechanisms to bring issues to policymakers are not working properly. There's a need to establish better ways to access the government and influence policies,” one respondent said.

In a recent positive development, in towns and cities with over 20,000 inhabitants, amendments to the law on local self-governance introduced in 2020 obliged policymakers to post legal acts on community websites for the sake of public discussion¹⁶.

At the same time, there was acknowledgement that it is also up to CSOs themselves to improve their communication and outreach strategies. Many local organizations may currently lack the skills to develop evidence-based research and use advocacy as a way to target policymakers¹⁷.

“Local NGOs, along with those that are based in the capital, need to learn how to better formulate the issues and increase the quality of their work and outreach. Constituency engagement is key,” another respondent commented, adding that the key was to understand the problems and needs of their local communities.

During round table discussions, some pointed to digital solutions and argued that a special software and virtual platform, similar to those used by businesses, could be developed for strengthening the skills and the overall knowledge of non-profit employees.

Regional Inequalities

Although in recent years international donors, including the EU, have paid more attention to supporting CSOs outside the capital city, Armenia's regions still struggle with the reality of having fewer resources and a great deal less funding. Regional CSOs usually depend on their peers from Yerevan in order to access larger donors and when it comes to meeting their requirements.

“There is a need to expand opportunities for regional organizations and to make them stronger. Yerevan-based NGOs often look for partners in the regions and impose their agenda on them. It's hard for regional groups to get funding and establish their own priorities without adjusting to the donor's objectives,” one of the respondents said.

One of the primary issues is also connected to human resources: the lack of experience and professional skills of their staff.

“It's time to create some three or four resource centers across the region that could provide support, mentorship, networking opportunities for local people and NGOs,” another respondent argued, adding that it would help strengthen the institutional development and capacities of local organizations. It could also play a role in improving the reputation of CSOs in the regions, which according to respondents, is rather low as civil society is not seen as an influential actor.

Support to Peacebuilding

Based on the conversations with Armenian civil society in late summer of 2021, nearly all respondents said it was too early to seek direct dialogue with their peers from Azerbaijan. Most of them said they still

16 (2020). “Amendments on the Law on Local Self-Government.” Retrieved online from: <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=139078>

17 (2020). “2019 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index: Armenia.” USAID. Retrieved online from: <https://www.usaid.gov/armenia/news-information/news/2019-civil-society-organization-sustainability-index-cso-si-scores-released>

felt anger and disappointment at their neighbors following the information war on social media and the explosion of hateful rhetoric, especially during the 44-day period of hot military clashes.

However, some civil society representatives said the time was ripe for talks between academics from the countries and/or members of think tanks.

“Armenia needs to have direct dialogue with Azerbaijan so that its messages don’t get distorted through an intermediary. The best thing to do now is a 1.5 diplomacy track that involves officials, thinks-tanks, and academia. Direct talks between the heads of states are barely possible now due to the ongoing tensions, so this is the best we can hope for,” a respondent said.

Environmental Challenges

In recent years, Armenia has been involved in various environmental initiatives in cooperation with several international organizations in the fields of renewable energy, biodiversity protection, forest resilience, recycling, and resource management. The EU4 Climate assessments list agriculture, human health, water resources, forestry, transport and energy infrastructure as the most vulnerable sectors in Armenia.

However, the drainage of Sevan Lake and the exploitation of the open-pit gold mine in Amulsar are seen as the two most challenging environmental issues in Armenia. Even though the environmental activism in Armenia has shifted away from direct confrontations in the post-revolution period, the Amulsar issue, a gold mine project led by the Lydian Armenia company in the Vayots Dzor region of Armenia, remains unsolved, and environmental activists have been campaigning against it for a significant period of time.

Activists also voice increased concerns over the contamination of Lake Sevan and the spa town of Jermuk. Some described the battle over the future of Amulsar as the “first major crisis” of the post-revolutionary government.¹⁸

Recommendations for the EU

- Continue applying conditionality and the “more-for-more principle” when supporting Armenia’s reform agenda, with a particular focus on justice, police, the fight against corruption, and anti-discrimination reforms
- Continue supporting youth exchanges and the cooperation within the framework of EU-Armenia Educational Policy Dialogue, as well as Erasmus + capacity-building activities and increase the resources necessary to promote the program
- Support the establishment of resource centers across the region that could provide assistance, mentorship, and networking opportunities for local NGOs
- Provide more institutional development programs for CSOs and resources to increase the capacity of outreach programs, with a particular focus on organizations in the regions. Additionally, develop and offer flexible support mechanisms for informal grassroots initiatives and regional NGOs to apply for small grants with simplified procedures.
- Provide resources for the establishment of special software and a platform for capacity-building for non-profits, offering online trainings, workshops, and lectures
- Consider supporting more joint programs for NGOs and the government (public-private partnerships on the local, regional, and national levels. Regional sectoral consortiums of different CSOs could bring the voices of grassroots organization to help improve strategic discussions and addressing of regional problems

18 Liakhov, P.; Khudoyan, K. (2018). “How Citizens Battling a Controversial Gold Mining Project Are Testing Armenia’s New Democracy.” Open Democracy. Retrieved online from: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/citizens-battling-a-controversial-gold-mining-project-amulsar-armenia/>

- Support initiatives for a peacebuilding dialogue between Azerbaijani and Armenian think-tanks and academia
- Use consistently strong language to condemn human rights violations in Armenia or attacks against civil society while referring to Armenia's international commitments to protect basic universal human rights
- Provide more resources for community engagement, civic education, active citizenship, and socio-cultural events which reflect European and democratic values
- Continue the efforts to support employment opportunities and social enterprises. Provide support to vocational education programs and work-based education that could lead to the increased employability of young people
- Continue environmental protection cooperation aimed at harmonizing legislation and providing effec

Baku, Azerbaijan, December 2014. Protesters rally to demand the release of political prisoners and end repressions.
Credit: Aziz Karimov.

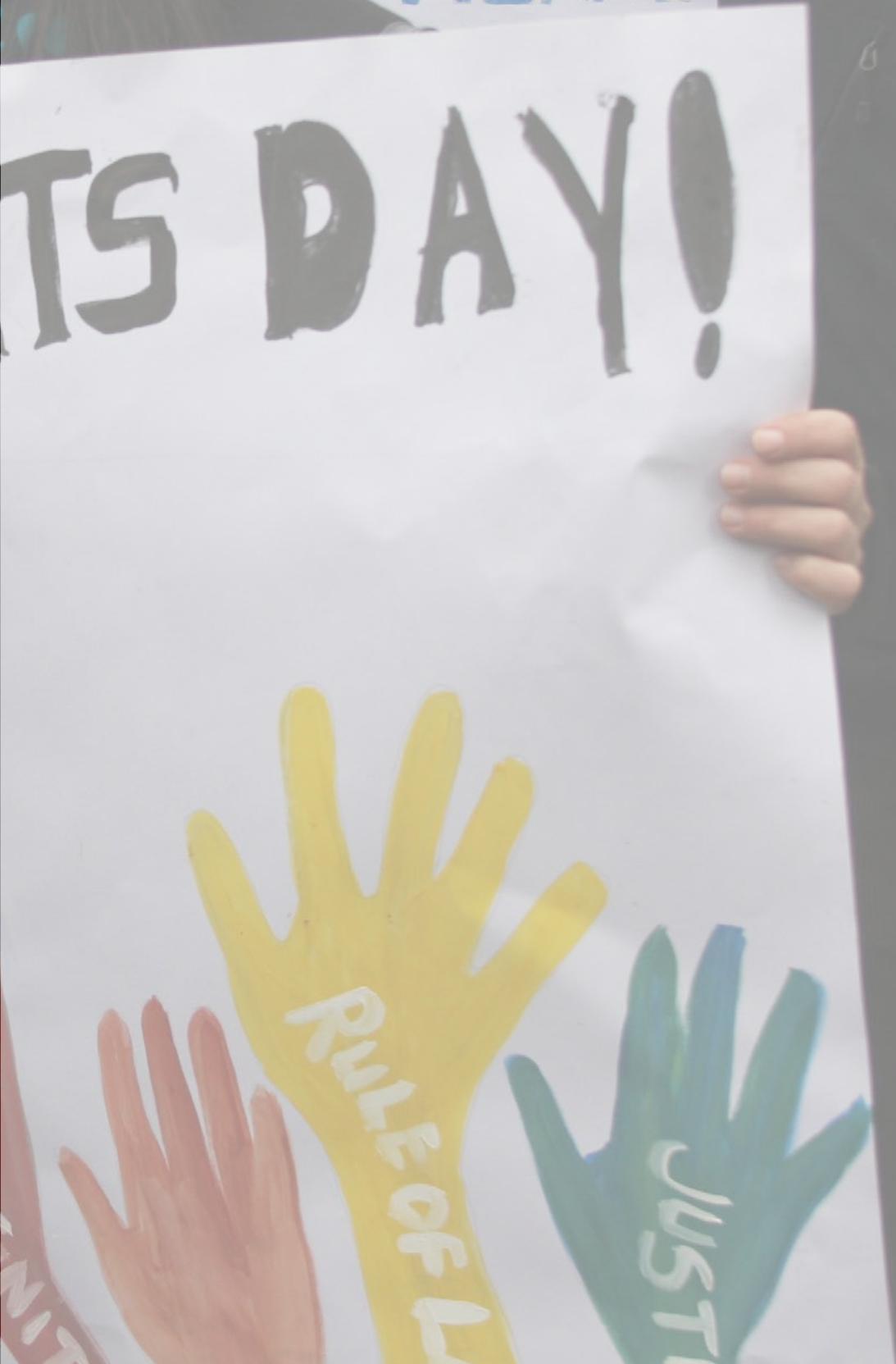
HUMAN RIGHTS

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National Context

Bilateral relations between the EU and Azerbaijan are currently based on the Partnership and Cooperation document signed in 1999. A new framework agreement, being negotiated since 2017, is expected to replace the old document in the near future and provide an updated foundation for the mutual cooperation.

Last summer, the government of Azerbaijan stated that 90% of the negotiations had been completed and the new agreement was expected to be signed within months¹⁹. The major stumbling block are reportedly issues related to the country's World Trade Organization (WTO)'s membership and economic competitiveness.

In fact, trade has always been considered a key area in the bilateral relationship. With its 36.7% share of the country's foreign trade, the EU remains Azerbaijan's largest trade partner²⁰. Over the last eight years, EU investment in Azerbaijan amounted to more than 20 billion EUR²¹.

Although Azerbaijan's civil society recognizes economic cooperation as a vital aspect of the bilateral framework, it has long criticized the EU for sidelining human-rights and democratization issues in its dialogue with President Ilham Aliyev²².

In fact, among the Eastern Partnership members that are covered in this report, Azerbaijan distinguishes itself by having the worst conditions for exercising political rights and civil liberties. In Freedom House's latest Freedom of the World report, the country was once again ranked as "unfree," underscoring how few changes have been made in the political sphere. With a score of 10 out of 100, Azerbaijan's situation compares to that of Uzbekistan and Belarus (both scoring 11 out of 100)²³. In the 2021 World Press Freedom Index prepared by Reporters Without Borders, the country is ranked 167 (out of 179) which places it between Egypt and Yemen²⁴.

Following the Azerbaijani government's crackdown against local human rights defenders, political activists and journalists in 2014, the once vibrant civil society sector has been hobbled. A number of government critics, including lawyers and media representatives, found themselves behind bars on trumped-up charges, others decided to flee the country. Although many of them have since been released and the government loosened its grip on the civic sector and lifted travel bans on a number of activists and political opposition²⁵, an atmosphere of fear prevails among local activists. Strict limits on the freedom of assembly and association have become the new normal in the country.

Moreover, the legal changes introduced between 2013 and 2015 have practically banned foreign donors from operating in the country. As a result, Azerbaijani civil society has been hampered by major financial constraints.

19 Suleymanov, E. (2021, July). "Avropa İttifaqı v Azərbaycan arasında sazişin bağlanması nədir?" BBC Azerbaijan. Retrieved online from: <https://www.bbc.com/azeri/azerbaijan-57944700?>

20 Information based on European Commission's data. Retrieved online from: <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/azerbaijan/>

21 Ibid

22 (2017). "Human Rights in Azerbaijan on the Eve of the Eastern Partnership Summit." Frontline Defenders. Retrieved online from: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/human-rights-azerbaijan-eve-eastern-partnership-summit>

23 Countries and Territories. Freedom House (2021). Retrieved online from: <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

24 World Press Freedom Index. 2021. Retrieved online from: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2021>

25 The notable exception remains the leader of the opposition Ali Kerimli, who has not been able to obtain a passport and has been banned from foreign travel since 2006. Travel restrictions were also imposed on Azerbaijani writer Akram Aylisli.

The country's independent NGOs have also continued to struggle to obtain official registration which further hinders their opportunities to apply for funding and conduct operations.

Overall, faced with restrictive laws and a hostile political environment, Azerbaijan's civil society remains stifled and weak. As some respondents described it, CSOs are simply busy with "surviving."

However, some changes may be on the horizon. Following the 44-day war over Nagorno Karabakh in 2020 in which Azerbaijan regained parts of the territories lost in the early 1990s, the popularity of President Ilham Aliyev has reached new heights. The new political situation has put the country at a crossroads. In the upcoming months, Azerbaijan could take a more authoritarian turn or could become open to reforms and legislative changes. The EU would be wise to use the momentum to advocate for lifting the restrictive laws on civil society and allow the return of international organizations.

The contributions that civil society and foreign assistance could bring to the country's development and policies are enormous. Meanwhile, as the Azerbaijani government launches a major rebuilding effort in parts of Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding area and plans for the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs), there is still no possibility for independent civil society to establish a presence in those regions.

Furthermore, the topic of peacebuilding is expected to return to the agenda as the conflict is far from being resolved. The issue, however, is that there are currently no organizations that are able to get involved in peacebuilding activities outside of government control. Previously known activists advocating for peace were persecuted or even charged with treason. Thus, in the post-war context, public diplomacy with the involvement of Azerbaijani civil society may remain a challenge.

Finally, the new policy approach of the Eastern Partnership – which premiums those with advanced goals towards European integration – raises fears among Azerbaijan's civil society that there will not be enough attention and resources available for their causes.

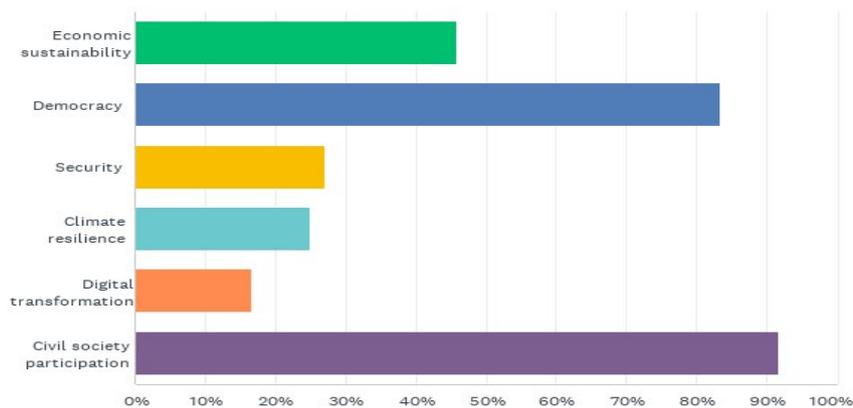
PART I

Survey Results

Conducted in June and July of 2020, the following online opinion survey was filled out by 53 representatives of Azerbaijani civil society from across various fields. For more detailed demographic profiles, see the methodology chapter.

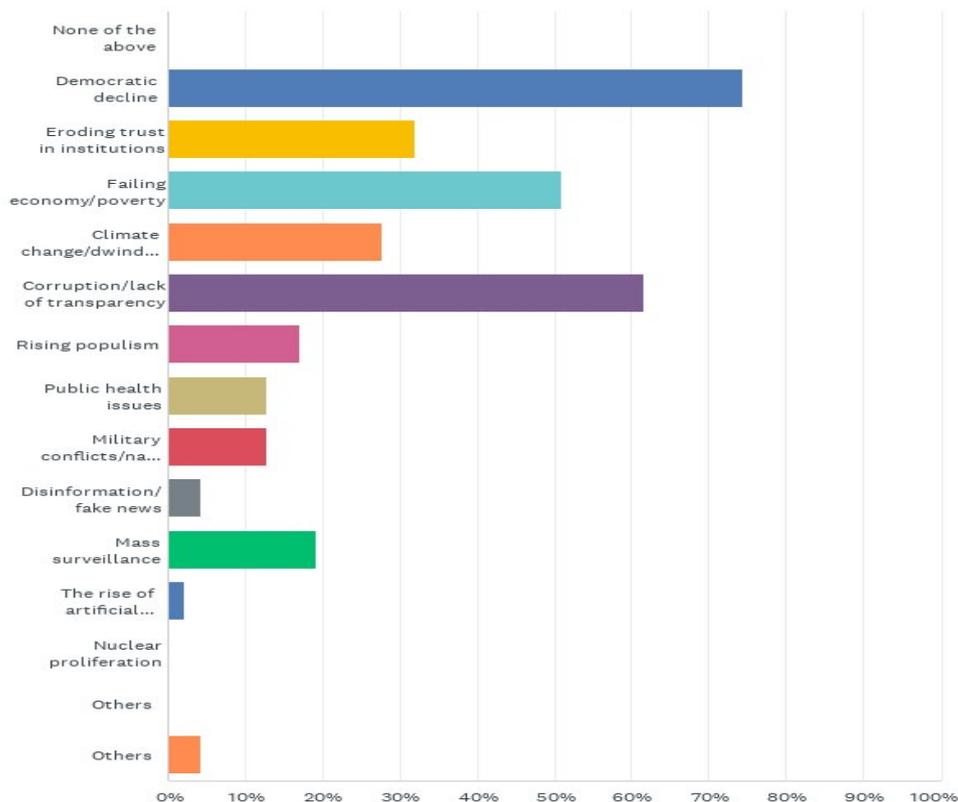
The findings of the survey suggest that the two most important areas the EU should focus on in Azerbaijan are civil society participation (91%) and democracy (83%). With 45% of votes, economic sustainability ranked third.

Q15 Which areas should the EU focus on more in your country?



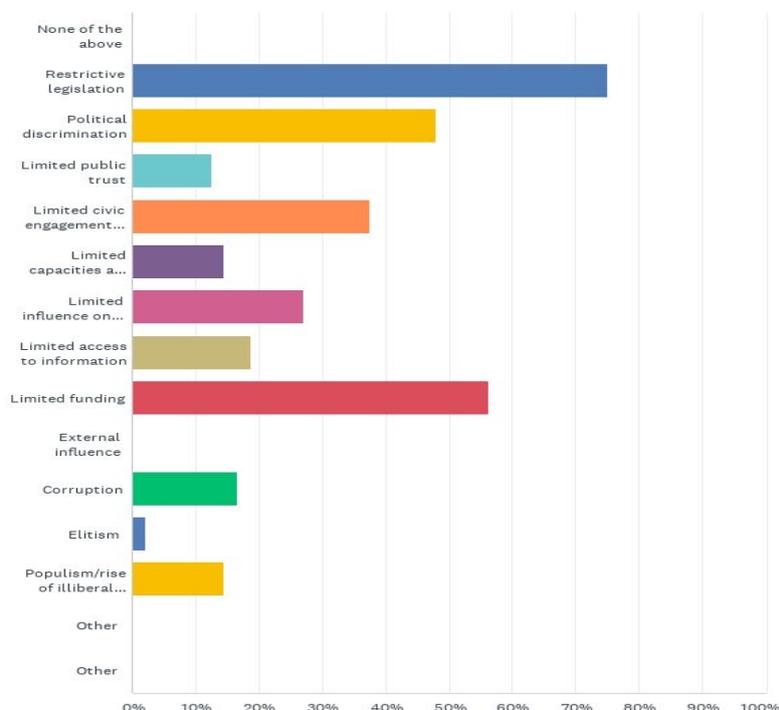
This view is further reflected in the perception of future challenges by civil society. Asked to select three major issues that Azerbaijan is facing, the majority of the respondents pointed to democratic decline (74%), corruption and lack of transparency (61%), and failing economy/poverty (51%).

Q18 What do you see as the main challenge for your country?



To complete the picture, respondents also commented on the main problems experienced by civil society itself. The top three identified challenges were restrictive legislation (selected by 75%), limited funding (56%), and political discrimination (56%), and political discrimination.

Q19 What do you see as the main challenges for civil society in your country? (choose max 3)



Asked how the EU can help address these problems, a number of civil society representatives pointed to the need for greater involvement in the issues connected to political and civic rights.

“The EU should make stronger calls on Azerbaijani government to stop interfering into the activities of NGOs and political parties and to respect freedoms of speech and expression of the citizens,” wrote one of the respondents, lamenting that European institutions may not be using their full leverage to press the government in that area.

In addition to the support for restoring civic space, other voices called for greater assistance to grassroots activities and unregistered independent initiatives.

“The EU should influence the implementation of democratic reforms in Azerbaijan. The setbacks in democracy and human rights should not be fully sacrificed to issues such as energy and security. The wasted financial support, allocated to GONGOs, should be rechanneled to independent groups,” a respondent commented.

The need for more capacity-building programs for civil society, support for quality non-formal educational opportunities, more attention to environmental and conflict resolution issues were also noted.

“[The EU could help address the challenges] by strengthening integration. Increasing the number of educational, student exchange, scholarship programs, internship programs. Increasing the number of low-cost airlines flying to Azerbaijan and easing the procedure for easily obtaining travel visas to reduce the travel costs to EU countries,” another respondent wrote.

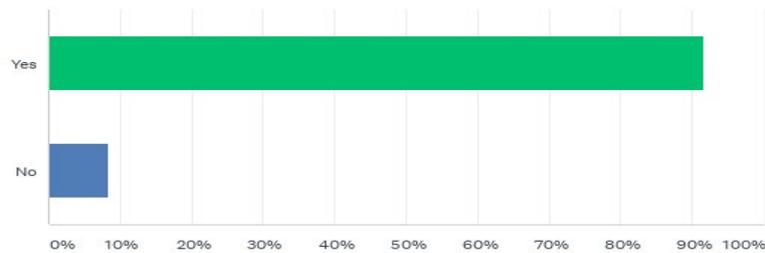
Although the space for human rights and political topics is largely restricted in Azerbaijan, most civil society groups can engage in some forms of low-key activism in other, less political areas. Over the last few years, environmental and gender issues have been particularly on the rise. Moreover, with the withdrawal of most foreign donors from Azerbaijan and the difficulties to establish legal cooperation

with civil society on the ground, there has been a dearth of capacity-building programs and cultural exchanges on offer for the local youth.

Awareness and Perception

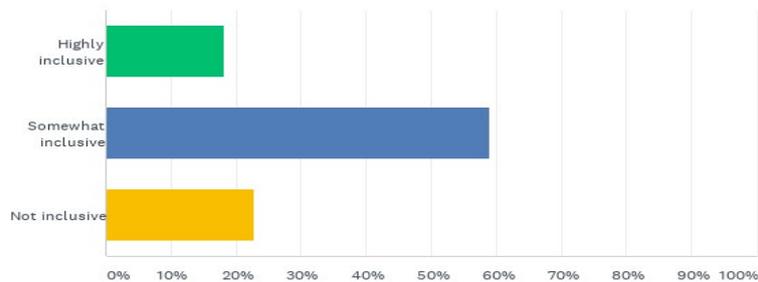
Nearly 92% of the survey respondents indicated familiarity with the Eastern Partnership program which is a consistent number across all five countries.

Q9 Have you heard of the European Union's Eastern Partnership program?



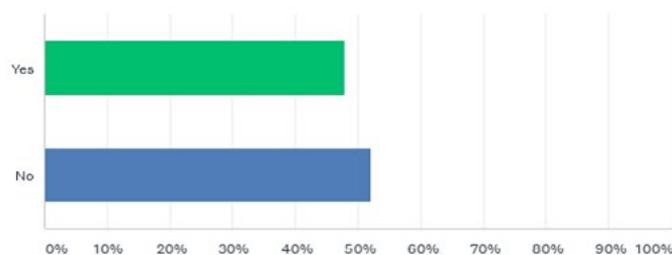
77% of all respondents considered the Eastern Partnership program highly inclusive or somewhat inclusive. 23% said the program was not inclusive enough.

Q11 How do you assess the inclusiveness of the Eastern Partnership's activities in your country's context?



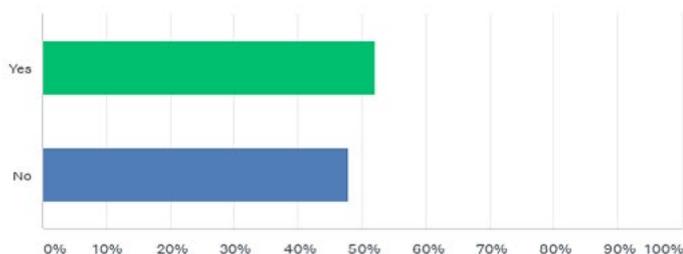
However, 52% have not heard about the new policy of the Eastern Partnership framework Beyond 2020, indicating that further promotion of the strategy may be needed.

Q12 Have you heard about the Eastern Partnership's policy framework "Beyond 2020"?



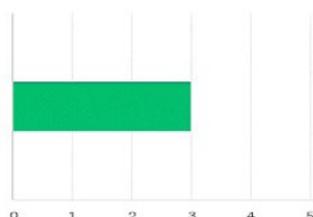
Most of the respondents (52%) were aware though of the Eastern Partnership’s climate objective – which is the highest number among the surveyed countries.

Q13 Have you heard about the Eastern Partnership’s policy objective on climate resilience?



Overall, despite the ongoing problems, the relationship with the European Union was assessed fairly positively. On a scale from 1 to 5 (with 5 being the highest score), civil society respondents rated the cooperation at 3.0.

Q14 How would you assess the current state of cooperation between your country and the European Union within the Eastern Partnership framework?



PART II

Qualitative research, round table discussions, and extensive interviews with civil society representatives have revealed a number of issues that cast a shadow over the long-term impact of the Eastern Partnership program in Azerbaijan and civil society’s effective participation therein.

Domestic Situation: Democratic Decline and Poor Human Rights Record

In its early years, the Eastern Partnership program made a significant difference for local NGOs.

Offering new opportunities for funding and collaboration, the new policy framework elevated civil society voices, opened doors to policymakers in Brussels, regional networking, and comparative analysis which allowed local CSOs to learn from the experiences of neighboring countries. Gradually, however, the worsening political environment after 2013 reversed many of those initial gains and left Azerbaijani civil society largely isolated in the region.

After the government’s adoption of restrictive anti-NGO laws and the subsequent state-led crackdown against civil society, independent media, and political opposition, the framework lost its original impact and appeal.

“If we compare the current state of civil society and human rights to what we had a decade ago, the situation is now much worse. One of the main failures is the collapse of civil society, the activation of GONGOs, and the lost independence of the National Platform,” said one of the local respondents.

The restricted civic space may yet prove to be the largest challenge hampering an effective participation in the Eastern Partnership program for Azerbaijani civil society.

Moreover, not only does it hinder opportunities for progress being made in politically-sensitive areas; it also cast a shadow over other dimensions of the program.

“Limitations imposed on the civic sector, coupled with the endemic corruption, is one of the main obstacles to the implementation of EU priorities in Azerbaijan– not only in the field of democratization, but also in the context of climate change and the digital economy. Without civil society and democratic institutions, the EU cannot reach its goals in Azerbaijan,” argued one of the respondents.

“We cannot talk about a stronger political situation or the level of economic cooperation or any other component of the Eastern Partnership without the proper involvement of civil society,” echoed another interviewee.

Limited Access to Policymakers and the Sidelineing of Independent Voices

Unlike in other countries in the region, Azerbaijan’s civil society has been increasingly isolated and has struggled over the last few years to make the various voices it is comprised of heard, even when it comes to non-political topics. Due to the restrictive system and harsh legislation in place, the majority of CSOs do not have access to the government and are not part of policymaking.

“In fact, Azerbaijani authorities were never keen to establish a dialogue with civil society. In Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova – all of the governments had relations with civil society, representatives from civil society could meet ministers and discuss the European integration process. That was not the case here,” explained one of the long-term members of the National Platform in Baku.

The lack of opportunity to participate in the ongoing negotiations over a new political agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan is another case in point for the representatives of local civil society. With the talks veiled in secrecy, there is no information about the stage of negotiations and no room for civil society to provide its contributions, respondents complained.

“Civil society must be an equal partner of the government when it comes to the implementation of any priorities related to Azerbaijan,” local CSO activists insisted.

Another dimension of this problem is also the weakening position of independent CSOs when it comes to their relations with European Union representatives. Many respondents noted that the sidelineing of independent groups has led to the EU increasing its cooperation with GONGOs and those who enjoy closer ties with the government.

“Most of EU-supported grants are done by those who have a good rapport with the government as there is a perception that it’s impossible to implement projects without the support of the government. But it’s the wrong approach: the main focus should be on addressing the political causes of the existing problems,” argues one of the respondents.

The Weak Position of the EU

Although there is no doubt among local civil society that the crackdown against government critics was orchestrated for domestic reasons, many local actors also point their finger at Brussels, complaining that the EU tacitly tolerated a more authoritarian turn by the Azerbaijani government and did little to influence any changes in its policies.

“In their relations with Azerbaijan, European policymakers prioritized energy issues, international security and economic cooperation. Democracy and human rights have never been considered as important,” commented one of the respondents.

The opinion was echoed by another long-term participant of the National Platform.

“Domestically, there was one major problem in relations to Azerbaijan during those years: the lack of a principled position of the EU in regard to a value-based policy when compared to the other states. Its position was always very much influenced – or even compromised - by the energy agenda.”

Furthermore, as some interviewees noted, the abandonment of the democratization processes and limitations placed on civic space also negatively affected the image of the European Union in Azerbaijan. The helplessness or unwillingness of the European institutions to improve the situation in the country led many civil society actors to lose trust in Europe.

“Why was the EU so attractive for our region? Because of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. But now, in all those fields, Azerbaijan is much worse than it was 10-15 years ago. The EU now needs to take serious risks and adjust its policy by putting values in the center,” argued an interviewee.

New Policy Approach Risks

In recent years, the EU has increasingly started to differentiate between the member states of the Eastern Partnership and to offer a premium for those that express a clear interest in deepening integration processes. There are fears among Azerbaijan’s civil society that the new policy approach will deal another blow to the already weak CSOs in the country and will divert resources to those that enjoy more favorable political conditions.

“We feel like we are being punished for what happened in 2014 and for all the restrictions imposed by our government,” commented one of the civil society representatives. “One would expect more support at a time of crisis, but what has happened is exactly the other way round. All the attention and benefits go now to the countries that signed the Association Agreement. But there should be also more focus on those that lagged behind,” the respondent added.

The (Dys)Functionality of the National Platform

According to our respondents, the restrictive conditions facing civil society in Azerbaijan have also negatively affected the functionality of the National Platform. Due to its weak operational capacities and the difficult political environment, even non-political projects have proved challenging to implement.

Furthermore, with the rising presence of GONGOs, it has become increasingly difficult to raise politically sensitive issues.

“The crackdown against independent voices dragged us all into a new political reality. Even organizations who used to have an independent status have to be careful about what they say and how they behave. Political prisoners, corruption, the human rights record – those issues have practically disappeared from the agenda,” admitted a long-term member of the National Platform.

Another interviewee noted that in the case of Azerbaijan, the National Platform may not provide an accurate reflection of the civil society sector.

“The composition of the Platform which includes a large number of GONGOs restricts the space for independent voices. But meanwhile, the EU delegation in Baku tries to build contacts with civil society through the Platform which in the case of Azerbaijan is not the best approach. It’s better to build direct, bilateral relationships and support the grassroots,” argued a respondent.

The Post-War Context

The unresolved territorial conflict with Armenia has influenced the domestic and foreign policy of both countries for over three decades. Following the ceasefire of 1994 that ended the six-year bloody war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Baku lost control of the Nagorno-Karabakh province and seven surrounding territories, and saw the displacement of over 800,000 people.

In all those years, the humanitarian consequences of the conflict have remained a central theme in the agenda of civil society – in spite of government efforts to restrict the involvement of NGOs in conflict resolution efforts.

Prior to the renewed outbreak of hostilities in 2020 over Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan's civil society groups had repeatedly called on the EU to help ensure the territorial integrity of the country and to facilitate the return of IDPs.

Although Baku emerged as a winner in the recent fighting and regained large parts of its lost territories, the conflict remains unresolved and it will continue to overshadow the political and social dynamics.

“We have expectations that the EU will be more consistent in its support to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, especially now with the presence of Russian peacekeepers in the area,” insisted one of the respondents who complained that the West followed a policy of double standards with its lack of clear-cut support in the negotiations process.

“For all those years, the EU and other institutions in Europe have had two different approaches when it comes to territorial integrity. In the case of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, there would be a strong support for their territorial integrity. But in the case of Azerbaijan, it was a completely different story,” lamented one of the respondents.

Furthermore, according to the respondents, the explicitly pro-Armenian position of France during the recent fighting undermined Europe's credibility and its popularity as a whole in the eyes of Azerbaijani civil society. It also negatively impacted the image of the Minsk Group in which France is one of the three co-chairs.

Recommendations for the EU

- Use the post-war momentum to engage the government of Azerbaijan in negotiations over new civil society legislation that will restore operational space for CSOs and the grassroots
- Use a consistently strong language to condemn human-rights abuses and violations of international commitments by the Azerbaijani government and ensure that mutual cooperation is underpinned by European values
- Ensure adequate participation of independent CSO (not solely GONGOs) in funding priorities, policy dialogue and consultations with the EU institutions and policymakers
- Provide more institutional development programs for independent Azerbaijani CSOs with a particular focus on organizations in the regions; additionally, develop and offer further flexible support mechanisms for informal grassroots initiatives
- Develop a strategy for the promotion and visibility of the Eastern Partnership inside Azerbaijan
- Intensify Azerbaijan's links with the European Union by strengthening the cultural aspect of the relationship: offer more study visits, scholarship programs for studying abroad, and university exchange programs
- Increase the support for research and innovative projects; ensure better promotion and visibility of the opportunities provided within the Horizon 2020 program.
- Establish a special fund for the promotion of women's rights, including awareness raising and assistance in the creation of shelters and crisis centers for victims of domestic violence
- Continue to support independent media as a key component of civil society that holds an important watchdog function

GEORGIA

Tbilisi, Georgia, November, 2021. Protesters call for the release of former president Mikhail Saakashvili.
Credit: OC Media, Shota Kincha.



GEORGIA

National Context

With its clear-cut political ambition to join the EU and NATO, Georgia has long been portrayed as a darling of the West. Following the Rose Revolution of 2003, the country has made Euro-Atlantic integration as a central feature of its foreign policy.

The Association Agreement signed in 2014 was celebrated as a milestone for Tbilisi's relations with the European Union and was perceived as the first step towards an even-deeper integration. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) opened the door to European markets as part of the political deal. Three years later, the visa liberalization regime was came into force and allowed Georgians to access the Schengen area visa-free.

Although Georgia has been seen largely as a beacon of democracy among the Eastern Partnership countries, events of recent years have put into question the government's willingness to pursue serious reform and to continue on the path of democratization.

Seven years after signing the Association Agreement, reportedly, Tbilisi has only fulfilled some 35% of its implementation plan. Key judicial and electoral reforms have been routinely postponed, as the country plunged into a deep political crisis following the controversial 2019 visit of Russian MP Sergei Gavrilov and the contested parliamentary elections in October 2020. Moreover, effective implementation of the long-awaited DCFTA remains a challenge and its potential has been underutilized as mainly large businesses have been able to meet the standard requirements for export.

But despite few tangible results on the ground other than visa-free travel, Georgian citizens still expresses deep support for European integration. According to the latest poll, 78% of Georgians want their country to join the EU.

However, the future is increasingly uncertain and the last two years do not paint an optimistic picture. Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, political polarization and stalled reforms, the harsh reality on the ground may eventually exhaust the patience of Georgian society.

An NDI poll from August 2021 shows that less than a quarter of Georgians believe that the country is heading in the right direction – compared to 39% a year before²⁶.

“Although the prospect of stronger ties with Europe occasionally gives Georgians a glimmer of hope for the future, it often seems as elusive as the supposedly bright future promised by the failed communism of the Soviet Union decades ago,” researcher Nino Lejava observed²⁷.

In light of the latest developments, one of the major challenges for the country's democracy appears to be increasing political polarization and the inability for main political parties to engage in consensus-based politics²⁸.

The engagement of the EU which helped to mediate a crisis between the government and opposition

26 NDI Poll (2021). Economy and Public Health Remain Top Priorities: Declining Trust in Country's Governance. Retrieved online from: <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-economy-and-public-health-remain-top-priorities-declining-trust-country-s>

27 Lejava, N. (2021). “Georgia's Unfinished Search for its Place in Europe.” Carnegie Europe. Retrieved online from: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/04/06/georgia-s-unfinished-search-for-its-place-in-europe-pub-84253>

28 Minesashvili, S (2021). “Why Do Georgian Political Parties Struggle to Negotiate? Structural Disincentives to Compromise-Based Politics.” Georgian Institute of Politics.

in the winter of 2021 defused some of the tensions, but the underlying structural issues continue to overshadow the prospects for a future dialogue-based democratic process.

State institutions remain weak and the executive branch's tight control of the judiciary allows the ruling party to use the justice system against political opponents²⁹.

In Freedom House's flagship annual report "Freedom in the World," Georgia scores 60 out of 100 points and is ranked partly free³⁰.

The 2021 report cites "oligarchic influence" on the political sphere and decision-making process, problems with the rule of law, and the inconsistent protection of civil liberties.

The worsening political climate has also increasingly affected the work of journalists and media outlets. In an assessment ahead of the 2021 local elections, Transparency International Georgia warned that the worsening situation in the media environment "has reached a critical level in the country" as attacks against journalists increased, along with pressure on media owners and incidents of illegal wiretapping³¹.

On the economic front, the situation does not appear optimistic either. With the COVID-19 pandemic hitting Georgia's economy and its tourism sector hard, 68% of citizens report that they can afford fewer products, services, and goods compared to the pre-pandemic period³². Every fourth Georgian said they in the poll that they either became unemployed (8%) or faced decrease of income/salary (13%³³). The poverty rate increased from 42% in 2019 to 46.6% in 2020³⁴.

Against the backdrop of a protracted political crisis, democratic decline, and a shaken economy, Georgia's civil society appears relatively strong. Although heavily dependent on financial support from international donors, Georgian CSOs fulfill the watchdog function, provide social and educational services, and contribute to the country's reform agenda. Unfortunately, they also remain largely disconnected from the wider public. According to the latest poll from the Caucasus Research Barometer, only 2% of Georgian respondents express full trust towards NGOs and 22% declare that they have only partial trust³⁵. CSOs are often perceived as „having a foreign agenda,“ or simply „pursuing their own interests³⁶.“ However, the crises triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic might have helped to partially repair that image as many NGOs and grassroots initiatives have been actively involved in crisis-response services and providing support to vulnerable communities.

Finally, in terms of the larger geopolitical picture, it is important to mention the increasingly active role of China in Georgia.

To further counterbalance Russia and attract more investment, in 2017, Tbilisi signed a free trade agreement with China which entered into force a year later. Although investment projects and political

29 Ibidem

30 (2021). Freedom in the World. Georgia. Freedom House. Retrieved online from: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2021>

31 (2021). Media: Target of Violence and Illegal Surveillance: Assessment of the Pre-Election Media Environment. Transparency International Georgia. Retrieved online from: <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/media-target-violence-and-illegal-surveillance-assessment-pre-election-media-environment>

32 NDI Poll (2021). Economy and Public Health Remain Top Priorities: Declining Trust in Country's Governance. Retrieved online from: <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-economy-and-public-health-remain-top-priorities-declining-trust-country-s>

33 Ibidem

34 (2021). Georgia: Country Context Overview. World Bank. Retrieved online from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/georgia/overview#1>

35 Caucasus Barometer Georgia (2020). TRUNGOS: Trust- NGOs. Caucasus Research Resource Center. Retrieved online from: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2020ge/TRUNGOS/>

36 For a more comprehensive reading on the state of civil society Georgia, see People in Need's recent report: Under the Spotlight. „A Close Look into the Emerging and Established Civil Society Actors in Moldova and the South Caucasus.“ Available at: <https://www.peopleinneed.net/building-a-civil-society-in-moldova-and-the-south-caucasus-7994gp>

partnership have turned out weaker than initially anticipated, they still make an impact given the small size of Georgia's economy³⁷. Currently, Beijing 's engagement is limited largely to road and rail infrastructure projects, academic exchanges, and vaccine support³⁸.

Today China may not constitute a viable alternative to the EU, but its relatively unconditional lending – free of ideological strings – may one day prove an attractive alternative for Tbilisi. Therefore, the EU can no longer take it for granted that it would remain the priority partner in future if Georgia continues on its current trajectory.

PART I

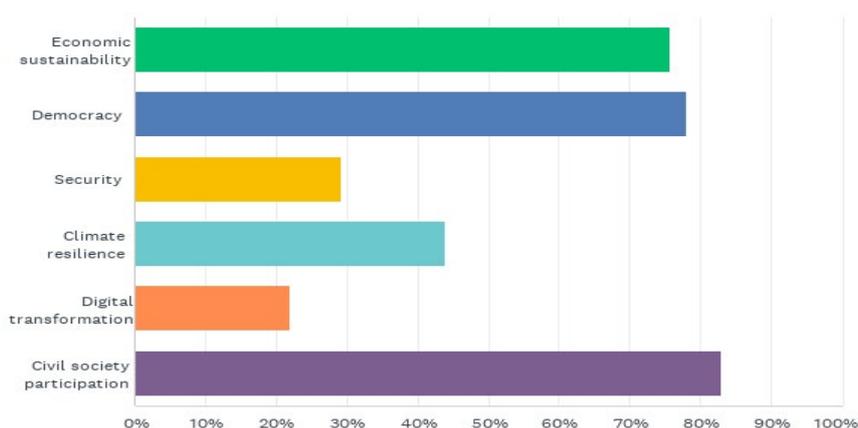
Survey Results

Conducted in the summer of 2021, the following online opinion survey was filled out by 41 representatives of Georgian civil society from across various fields. For more detailed demographic profiles, see the methodology chapter.

According to survey participants, three priority areas for EU support in Georgia are civil society participation (82.93%), democracy (78.05%), and economic sustainability (75.61%).

The answers correspondent to the perceived challenges facing the country. The majority indicated failing economy/poverty (78.05%) and democratic decline/weakening the rule of law (65.85%) as problematic issues likely to continue affecting the country in the nearest future. Climate change and eroding trust in institutions ranked joint third with 39.02% of votes.

Q15 Which areas should the EU focus on more in your country? (choose max 3)

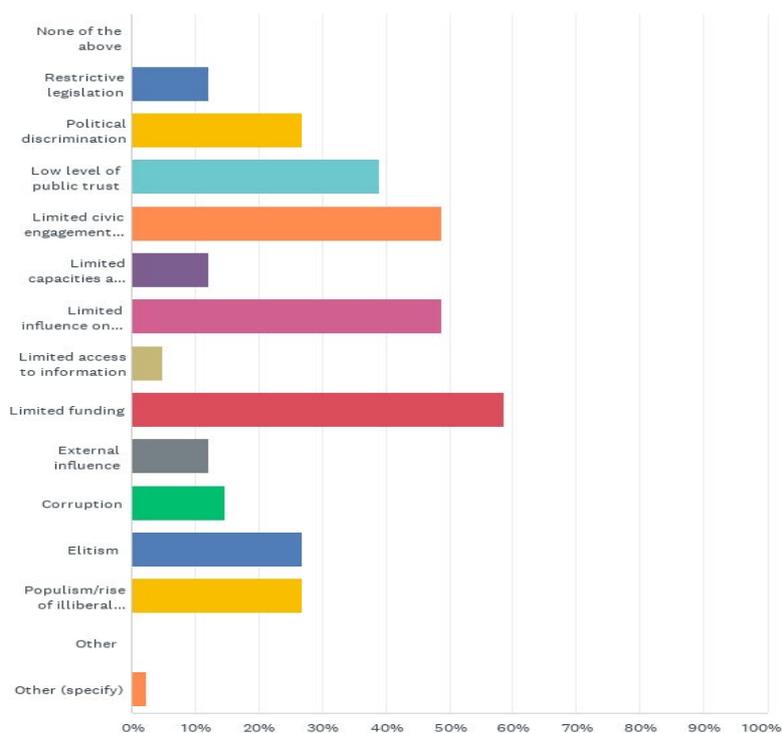


37 Brattberg, E.; Feingenbaum E. (2021). China's Influence in Southerneastern, Central, and Eastern Europe: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries. Carnegie Europe. Retrieved online from: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/13/china-s-influence-in-southeastern-central-and-eastern-europe-vulnerabilities-and-resilience-in-four-countries-pub-85415>

38 Ibidem

When it comes to the main issues facing civil society, Georgian respondents were mainly concerned with the availability of funding (58.54%), limited civic engagement (48.78%), and its limited influence on policymakers (48.78%).

Q19 What do you see as the main challenges for civil society in your country? (choose max 3)



Asked how the EU could help best address the challenges lying ahead, a number of survey participants said it was important to foster respect for civic engagement and horizontal dialogue, both at the national and regional levels.

“Taking into account the opinion of civil society and increasing their involvement in identifying problems, as well as taking into account the vision of local civil society organizations regarding the needs of the local community while supporting projects / initiatives,” one respondent wrote.

“At the moment, only civil society shares the ideas and spirit of the European Union in Georgia. Therefore, the EU must strengthen its support for the sector and be more critical and principled towards the current government that is moving away from democratic values,” another respondent commented.

Civil society representatives also pointed to the need to support digital infrastructure and enable citizens living in the regions of Georgia, including hardly accessible mountain villages, to use digital services.

More funding opportunities which would help CSOs invest in organizational development, including stronger support and focus on civil society and grassroots based in the regions, was also indicated as a priority, along with the need to engage in cultural and informational programs.

“The work of the EU is most effective when there is more involvement at the regional level and the results of the change are visible to the wider population. Access to reliable information is important as a counterweight to nationalist and radical views. It is necessary to deepen exchange programs, tours and cultural relations in EU countries,” commented a respondent.

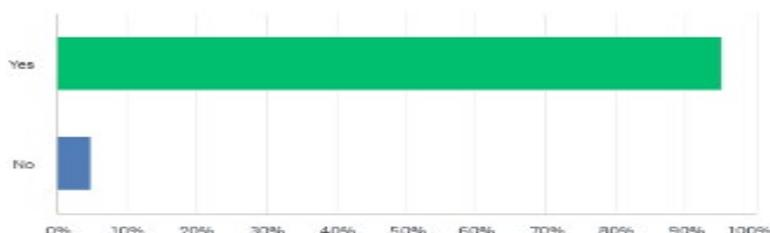
Survey participants also mentioned the importance of working with political parties and continuing the efforts to support educational institutions.

Finally, investment in sustainable economic growth and the promotion of entrepreneurial programs were also listed alongside the main priorities.

Awareness and Perception

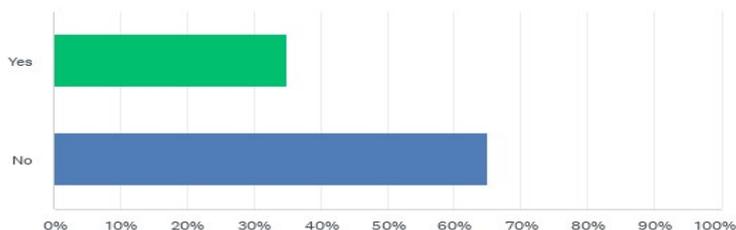
95.12% of respondents indicated familiarity with the Eastern Partnership program – which is the highest result among the surveyed countries.

Q9 Have you heard of the European Union's Eastern Partnership Initiative?



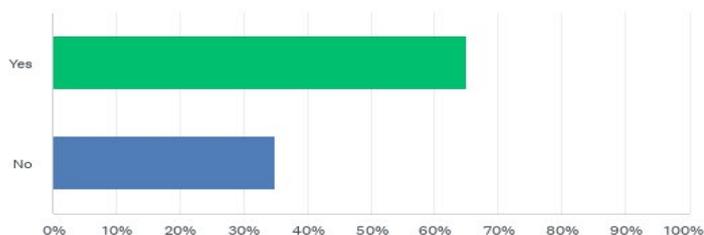
However, as of the summer of 2021, only 35% of civil society respondents had heard about the Eastern Partnership's new policy document: Beyond 2020. The result indicates the need for further promotional efforts from the side of the EU.

Q12 Have you heard about the Eastern Partnership's policy framework "Beyond 2020"?



Compared to other countries in the region, Georgia scores slightly higher in terms of its awareness of the climate objective. 65% of respondents declared familiarity with the climate goal within the Eastern Partnership program.

Q13 Have you heard about the Eastern Partnership's policy objective on climate resilience?



Finally, Georgian civil society rated the overall cooperation with the EU at 3.7 out of 5 – the highest score among the surveyed countries.

Q14 How would you assess the current state of cooperation between your country and the European Union within the framework of Eastern Partnership? (1 - lowest; 5 - highest mark)



PART II

Qualitative research, including round table discussions and extensive interviews with civil society representatives in Georgia, revealed a number of issues that pose a challenge for the sector’s operations, participation in the Eastern Partnership framework, and future impact.

Democratic Backsliding and Societal Polarization

Following the political crisis which unfolded in June 2019 and escalated in February 2021 with the arrest of United National Movement (UNM) opposition leader Nika Melia, Georgia has been in a state of turmoil. Although the successful mediation by the European Union resolved the political standoff and led to the release of the politician and to UNM’s entry into the parliament, the EU-mediated agreement was not recognized by the main opposition party at first and then questioned by the ruling Georgian Dream party itself.

In the fall of 2021, protests broke out anew over the arrest of Mikhail Saakashvili and the results of the local elections. Security and policy responses to peaceful protest have been heavy-handed, accompanied by forceful rhetoric against the opposition, watchdog organizations, the Public Defender’s Office, and international partners including the EU and the US.

Meanwhile, the ongoing political tension, the polarization of the media discourse, and abuse of the administrative resources during election campaigns continue to pose major challenges for the future of the country and the will of the government to stay on the path of democratic reform³⁹.

“Now it’s more likely that Georgia will continue to make reforms as a formality, but no results will be achieved. To be European means to be more democratic. In other words, the government must open up space to others political forces,” argued one respondent.

The increasingly polarized political scene also has immediate consequences for the country’s civil society sector and poses threats for the future.

“We are at a turning point in Georgia, where the ruling party is dominating all spheres of public interest – judiciary, executive, parliamentary. It doesn’t matter how liberal or authoritarian it is, when you have absolute power, it corrupts absolutely,” explained a civil society representative who warned that Georgian CSOs may soon become a target.

39 Compendium of Policy Documents. (May 2021). Georgian Institute of Politics.

“The only theme that is not controlled is civil society. Georgia has vibrant and strong civil society, but if the government is trying to grab even more power for the foreseeable future, it may see CSOs as the biggest adversaries for its goals,” the respondent added⁴⁰.

With this democratic backsliding, civil society also faces obstacles in fulfilling its watchdog function.

NGO representatives pointed to the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult to engage with the government while maintaining independent positions.

“They practically say if you are not with us, you are against us. But if NGOs can’t engage with the authorities, they become even more critical, and the government itself becomes critical towards NGOs,” explained one respondent.

However, the political crisis and interactions with the government are not the only challenges facing civil society. Another point of polarization is the relations with the powerful Georgia Orthodox Church which vocally opposes the promotion of progressive social issues by liberal CSOs.

In light of recent events in which LGBTI activists were forced to cancel a Pride march after activists and journalists were targeted by conservative-nationalist groups supported by the Church⁴¹, respondents also talked about the need to have more dialogue between civil society and the Orthodox community.

“The Patriarch of Georgia, along with the army, enjoy the highest level of trust, while civil society, year after year, receives a very low score in the trust polls. This form of polarization has also had quite a negative impact on the development of the country,” a civil society representative commented, calling for more conciliation efforts.

The European Union’s Approach to Georgia

One of the common themes that appeared in interviews and talks with Georgian civil society was the need for the European Union to develop a more tailored-made policy for member states in the Eastern Partnership program.

“Some people think we will always be under the shadow of Ukraine which has many more problems than Georgia. It brings a lot of disappointments here when we see that we’re all thrown into one basket. That’s why an individual approach is needed,” argued an interviewee from civil society.

Some respondents also advocated for a deeper integration benchmark for Georgia - if it is not based on a full EU membership, then at least on a membership in the European Economic Area.

“The EU needs to judge according to what the country wants to achieve. Georgia’s ambition is to become a member of the EU and NATO. With that goal, it cannot be compared to Azerbaijan and Belarus, or even Armenia. If we look at the situation with the immediate neighbors, of course Georgia looks like a shining example. But that’s not the correct way to measure our successes and failures. We need much higher benchmarks,” commented another civil society representative.

“According to many polls, more than 80 percent of Georgians support EU membership. It means that Europe can have a lot of leverage here and can use conditionality. The government may not like it, but the EU has allies in civil society, academia, and business circles who are interested in seeing more results,” the respondents added.

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41 News Wires. (2021). “Georgia LGBT Activists Cancel Pride March After Clashes, Office Attack.” France 24. Retrieved online from: <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210705-georgia-lgbt-activists-cancel-pride-march-after-clashes-office-attack>

For civil society representatives, the case in point was Georgia's commitments under the Association Agreement. According to some estimates, as of 2021, the country has implemented roughly 35% of the deal signed in 2014. Seven years on, progress appears slow even though the government declared Georgia would file for an EU membership application in 2024.

"In the food and phytosanitary sectors, some two fifths of the normative acts which have been approved by the Georgian government are not enforced. We have sent the results to the parliamentary committee responsible for EU integration and there was no reply. The committee on agriculture, on their side, said that they may look at the issue at the end of the year. Nobody is in a hurry to implement the agreement and for us, the CSOs, it means that it is not an advocacy tool anymore," complained a civil society representative who has been involved in the monitoring of Georgia's progress in fulfilling the Association Agreement.

Furthermore, the recent decision of the government to turn down a 75 million EUR loan from the EU conditional on a number of reforms in the justice sector raised eyebrows among civil society⁴².

"For the first time ever, Georgia has officially declined macroeconomic assistance from the EU which was linked to the judiciary reform. It's a big step away from the EU," one respondent commented.

"If the government is refusing the conditionality, it means that even more conditional money should be offered. Without that approach, the reforms will no longer be happening. The EU should capitalize on Georgia's stated commitment towards European integration," argued the respondent.

A Value-Based vs. Pragmatic Approach

Another common theme that was echoed in a number of interviews across the civil society sector and during the round table discussions was the need for the EU to be more vocal about its values and use consistently strong language in its public statements about Georgia.

"We see that the EU is no longer active in promoting values. A few years ago, when Federica Mogherini was the EU foreign policy chief, she introduced a concept of principled pragmatism – we can talk to anybody as long as they support the EU as an international body. But that approach did a bad job when it came to Georgia and Ukraine," said a respondent, calling for the return to a value-based policy.

"The EU has big problem in terms of positioning towards Georgia. They need to be more precise about their foreign policy and stricter with countries like ours," the respondent added.

Other interviewees pointed out that more clarity from the side of the EU could help break the stalemate and give new impetus to the implementation of the Association Agreement.

"When there is a crisis or some problems related to democracy, the EU is using idiomatic expressions and the language is not clear. Also, the reform process has been very slow in the country, but the EU never talks openly about it. If there was more criticism, it would help civil society and some other actors to put more pressure on the government," a respondent argued.

Local Expertise and International Support

According to CSO representatives, Georgia needs further support from the EU when it comes to bringing technical expertise related to the adoption of new European standards and expertise-sharing.

"Some of those standards are not being implemented in the proper way and are not interpreted correctly at the national level. That's why it is essential for EU countries to bring more experts, comment on new draft

42 Mandaria, T. (2021). "Georgia Turns Down 75 Million Euros from the EU." Eurasianet.org. Retrieved online from: <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-turns-down-75-million-euros-from-the-eu>

laws before their adoption, and offer recommendations from their side,” argued a CSO representative involved in monitoring the implementation of the Association Agreement.

Round Table participants also called on the EU to allow civil society access to have a seat at the table.

“The EU tends to send experts to different government organizations, but we don’t have access to them. It would be good to introduce a procedure that two or three CSOs are invited to the trainings of government officials. EU experts should also have time for consultations with civil society,” respondents argued.

Finally, CSO representatives stressed that along with international expertise, there should be space for the involvement of local stakeholders that would help the government and EU to better understand the entire country context and its needs.

“Civil society can cooperate and we can also engage local researchers. It is important to have both international and local expertise,” a respondent added.

Migration and Brain Drain

International labor migration has long been a central issue for Georgia’s political and economic life. Remittances received in the country increased in June 2021 by 19.3% compared to the previous year and totaled 201.9 million USD (178 million EUR)⁴³.

With the limited economic opportunities and decreased tourism numbers amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic, many Georgians decided to seek a better life abroad.

“People migrate because they don’t see opportunities here, including the younger generation. And once the young people go, they don’t usually come back,” complained an NGO representative who said they increasingly face staff shortages as young people decide to move abroad.

Similar patterns of domestic urban migration contribute to collapsing rural economies, and reduced civil society activism in the regions. PIN research has found that civil society actors in rural areas face additional pressures from local authorities, who often regard CSOs as opposition-aligned, including threats to their livelihood. Doing rural civic engagement can also involve confronting barriers from conservative community norms, in particular disregarding the voices of women and youth.

Integration of Ethnic Minority Groups

According to the 2014 census, ethnic minorities make up 13% of Georgia’s population. The largest groups are the Azerbaijanis (6%) and Armenians (5%)⁴⁴. Although ethnic minorities largely see Georgia as their homeland and declare their loyalty to the state, these groups remain marginalized and many of these communities face limited economic opportunities and struggle with low proficiency in the Georgian language which further affects their participation in public life⁴⁵.

43 Agenda. Ge (2021) “Money Transfers to Georgia up 19.3%.” Retrieved only from: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/1978>

44 2014 General Population Census. National Statistics Office of Georgia. Retrieved online from: <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/568/2014-general-population-census>

45 Amirejibi R.; Gabunia K. “Georgia’s Minorities: Breaking Down Barriers to Integration.” Carnegie Europe. Retrieved online from: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/06/09/georgia-s-minorities-breaking-down-barriers-to-integration-pub-84689>

Despite a number of projects implemented in recent years by both civil society and the state, efforts to increase the integration of the ethnic minorities are still limited. Furthermore, building trust is a complicated issue, especially for less experienced youth groups.

“Our networks include thousands of people from all over the country. However, the most difficult challenge for youth organizations is to reach out to new audiences. It is particularly difficult to involve more people and make our voices heard in the Kist and Azerbaijani communities,” commented a representative of the Young European Ambassadors Initiative.

A recent assessment conducted by PIN shows that the COVID-19 has only aggravated the situation. Since the onset of the pandemic, the minority groups have had limited access to information on new COVID-related regulations, as well as limited access to health-care treatment and services as government agencies struggled to ensure effective communication and information-sharing in local languages. Additionally, the lack of pharmacies and hospitals in the villages of the regions, and inadequate infrastructure, posed additional challenges.

Furthermore, minority groups have faced increased discrimination during the pandemic, being portrayed in social media as virus-spreaders and subjected to xenophobic attacks.

Regional Inequalities

Similar to other countries in the Eastern Partnership program, Georgian civil society struggles with unequal access to resources and representation at various thematic stakeholder and donor meetings.

“Most of the members of the National Platform lack financial resources, but it’s particularly a problem for regional organizations. Because of that, they cannot provide expertise in many topics,” a respondent said.

In general, inequality between the center and the periphery is not unique in Georgia’s context, however, since NGOs emerged in Georgia in the early 1990s – problems related to access to funding have been particularly challenging for regional CSOs. It has resulted in a lack of funding for capacity-building and professional development and fewer financial resources for the staff. It also affected the local job market as there was a mismatch between skills and the needs of employers.

On the other hand, the lack of understanding of the context and local needs by donors resulted in funds being channeled to more established, Tbilisi-based, English speaking CSOs that in most cases would do their work on behalf of the periphery. Sadly, according to observations and PIN interviews with regional CSOs, not much has been changed in the regions through the work of these capital-based NGOs.

However, this approach is slowly changing. Recently, some donors have started to understand that there are also skilled CSOs based in regions that can represent their communities and achieve the results without the engagement of Tbilisi-based CSOs.

Also, nowadays, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, regional organizations have many more opportunities to engage through online means which can democratize participatory processes.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia

Following a civil war in the early nineties, Georgia lost control over the territory of Abkhazia and then lost South Ossetia after the war in 2008. Today, these conflicts have remained frozen and Tbilisi has little leverage over the breakaway regions. The unresolved dispute also continues to overshadow the country’s domestic policies and its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

While the situation in the South Ossetia does not allow for much engagement in the eyes of local civil society, some respondents argued for opportunities to increase cooperation with Abkhazia.

“Shrinking civil society space is also an issue for people living in the breakaway region, so strengthening CSOs could support the needs of a population experiencing greater poverty, weaker health and education services, and inequalities between ethnic communities,” suggested another respondent.

Recommendations for the EU

- Continue applying conditionality and the “more-for-more principle” when supporting Georgia’s reform agenda
- Use consistently clear, strong language to condemn the lack of progress in key reform area or in reaction to evolving political crises in the country
- Continue to publicly encourage the government of Georgia to embark on decentralization, as well as judicial and electoral reforms
- Assist Georgia in the implementation of the Association Agreement by bringing more EU experts and creating opportunities to share experience and skills. Ensure participation of civil society and/or enable CSOs’ to have access to such trainings. Along with offering more international expertise, ensure that there is a chance for input and collaboration with local experts and researchers when it comes to policymaking and applying the directives.
- Consider creating more opportunities for development support in Abkhazia (alongside the rest of the country) as a contribution to regional confidence building
- Find mechanisms to support civil society and youth in the breakaway regions, to strengthen their role as local peacebuilding actors and human rights monitors
- Urge the government to ensure a seat for civil society in the policy reform processes
- Provide additional resources for the establishment of a multi-annual financial framework for regional cooperation and the exchange of experiences between Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine
- Provide additional resources and support to a broader range of civil society actors, representing diverse constituents, including those based in the regions
- Continue to support independent media as a key component of civil society and functional democracy

Chisinau, Moldova, October 2018. Protest of the Occupy Guguta movement.
Courtesy photo: Daniel Ciubotaru.

MOLDOVA





#PROTEST
PERMANENT

National Context

Moldova, a small post-Soviet republic of 3.5 million people, has long been pulled between two rival geopolitical directions: Russia and the European Union.

Since independence in 1991, the country has suffered from a chronic failure to build stable ruling coalitions, and to decide upon a clear institutional structure for the government. As a result, Moldova endured years of prolonged political and constitutional crisis, with political parties, oligarchs and the constitutional court fighting to shape the system.

However, despite the internal issues and alternations in power between pro-Western and pro-Russian forces, since 2000s, both the Communist and liberal parties attempted to develop close relations with Brussels. Paradoxically, it was under the rules of the Communist party when the support for the EU – at 76.2% of favorable ratings - reached its highest levels in 2007⁴⁶.

In later years though, pro-European sentiments decreased. The political block that overthrew the Communist party's rule in 2009 was called the Alliance for European Integration and brought a lot of expectations for real change and reform. But despite big hopes, the oligarchic interests and deep-seated corruption practices prevailed, leaving Moldova's public disappointed with the state of affairs.

Nevertheless, despite internal challenges, the geopolitical direction remained unchanged and set the stage for a new level of cooperation with the EU.

Signed on July 1st, 2014 and entered into force two years later, the Association Agreement, provides a solid foundation for deepening the country's bilateral ties with the EU and allows Moldovans to enter the Schengen zone without visas. Focusing on the core of the reform agenda, it aims to integrate Moldova into the internal market of the EU and help converge its legislation with European Union standards. The Agreement includes the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area.

Yet it turned out that Brussels might have been overly optimistic about the country's prospects with the European Union. Within the same year, a corruption scandal of international breadth arose when 1 billion USD disappeared from Moldovan banks (around one eighth of the country's GDP). The unfolding political crisis occurred alongside the tacit alliance of the Socialists (former Communists) and the Democrats (Vladimir Plahotniuc's party) whose dividing up of the country's institutions caused further irritation within the EU. As a result, the financial assistance to Moldova has been therefore significantly reduced and conditioned upon progress in reforms.

However, the last two years have offered some glimmer of hope. Following years of political instability that were permeated by oligarchic power and graft, the country has seen a sharp change in the political direction that promises to tackle long-standing internal problems.

In the 2020 presidential election, the incumbent Moscow-backed president Igor Dodon lost his seat to Maia Sandu, a former World Bank economist, who advocated for a strong fight against corruption and a more pro-European course. Sandu's Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) also secured a majority in the subsequent parliamentary elections held in July 2021 and vowed to enact a set of major reforms.

To be sure, it is still too early to expect major results. The socio-economic challenges and politicized institutions continue to overshadow the reform process.

46 Vardanean, E. (2018). Moldova Between Russia and the West: Internal Divisions Behind the Commitment to European Integration. Institute Francais des Relations Internationales. Retrieved online from: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rnv_110_vardanean_moldova_russia_and_the_west_2018.pdf

In Freedom House's annual Freedom in the World report, Moldova, with a score of 61 out of 100, is rated as partly free. Although the country features a competitive electoral environment, and relatively secured rights such as freedom of speech, assembly and religion, corruption and oligarchic interests remain a major issue, along with problems in the area of the rule of law.⁴⁷ The reform of the judicial sector also appears unfinished and it is one of the major priorities of the incumbent government.

In July 2021, together with the Foreign Ministers of Georgia and Ukraine, Moldova signed a joint memorandum pledging to bring their countries closer to the European Union by conducting a set of deeper political reforms. Dubbed the Association Trio, the alliance is expected to set all three countries more firmly on the pro-European path and to tailor the reform process to the local needs.

But despite the fairly strong momentum for European integration, a great deal will depend on whether the new government will be able to deliver on its electoral promises and embark on meaningful reform.

President Maia Sandu's political party is also under pressure to balance Moldova's relations with Moscow as the country remains completely dependent on gas supplies from Russia.

When it comes to local civil society, the sector is relatively vibrant and has played an important role over the last years in keeping the country on a pro-European path and towards democratization. Moldovan CSOs have been instrumental in monitoring the progress in the implementation of the Association Agreement and have provided additional expertise for reform in key areas, such as the judicial reform, the media sector, and NGOs.

According to the 2020 USAID CSO Sustainability Index, Moldova scores a constant 3.7 (out of 7; 1 indicating the best score), which is a fairly good result even when being compared to its neighbors (3.7 in Romania and 3.2 in Ukraine).

Also, recently, after a two-year delay, the country's parliament finally approved the Law on Non-Commercial Organizations after its final reading on June 11, 2020 and the new law entered into force on August 27, 2020. The improvement in the legal framework resulted in a slight improvement in overall CSO sustainability rating in 2020.⁴⁸

Among other positive developments is the adoption of the 2% law in 2016 (allowing people to direct 2% of their income tax to NGOs) and its successful implementation in 2017, as well as the adoption of the law on social entrepreneurship in November 2017.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, civil society in Moldova still faces serious challenges⁵⁰. NGOs critical of government policies are still potentially subject to harassment and intimidation by public authorities and officials. There's also a need to strengthen the capacities of the sector and increase the sustainability of CSOs.

Additionally, since the 1992 conflict, there is a clear division between the development of civil society in the breakaway territory of Transnistria, located on the left bank of the Dniester River, and in the rest of Moldova. In the former, local civil society faces a worsening operational environment and harsh legislation. During the COVID-19 crisis, pressure on activists, in particular human rights defenders, has increased. There are also few existing legal mechanisms that can be used to defend the rights of people living in the region.

Finally, contact between representatives of civil society on the two banks of the river remains limited.

47 Freedom in the World: Moldova (2021). Freedom House. Retrieved online from: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2021>

48 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index: Moldova (2021).USAID, ICNL, FHI360. Retrieved online from: <https://storage.googleapis.com/cso-si-dashboard.appspot.com/Reports/CSOSI-Moldova-2020.pdf>, p.1.

49 EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in the Republic of Moldova 2018-2020. Retrieved online from: <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/file/84108/download?token=nGvN-lUL>

50 For a more comprehensive reading on the state of civil society in Moldova, see People in Need's recent report: Under the Spotlight. „A Close Look into the Emerging and Established Civil Society Actors in Moldova and the South Caucasus.“ Available at: <https://www.peopleinneed.net/building-a-civil-society-in-moldova-and-the-south-caucasus-7994gp>

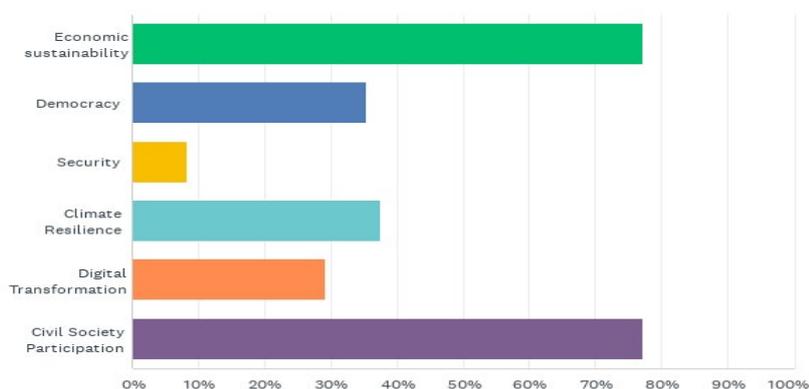
PART I

Survey Results

Conducted in June and July of 2020, the following online opinion survey was filled out by 53 representatives of Moldovan civil society from across various fields. For more detailed demographic profiles, see the methodology chapter.

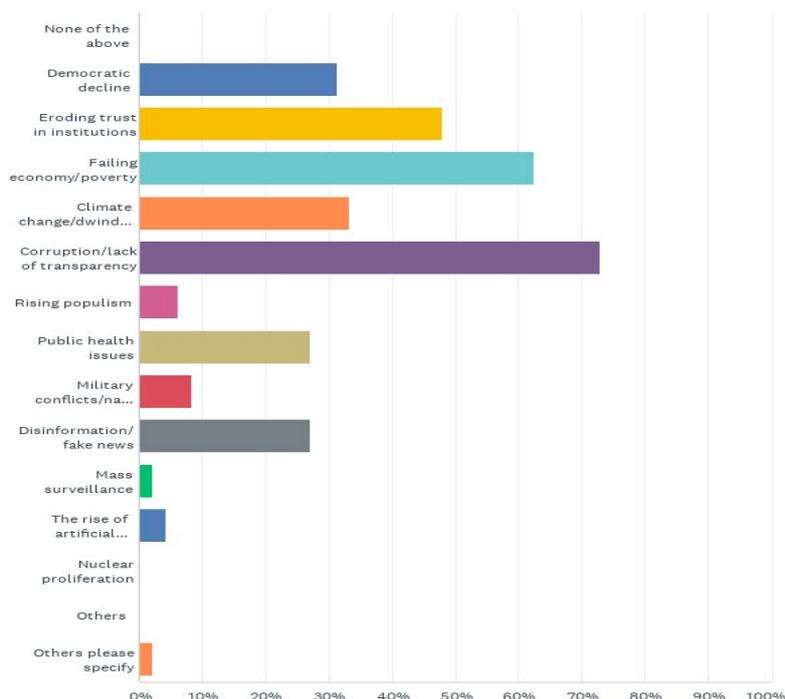
Asked which three areas of cooperation should constitute the priorities in the EU's support for Moldova, most of the respondents pointed to economic sustainability and civil society participation (77.08% each). Climate resilience ranked third with 37.50% of votes.

Q15 Which areas should the EU focus on more in your country? (choose max 3)



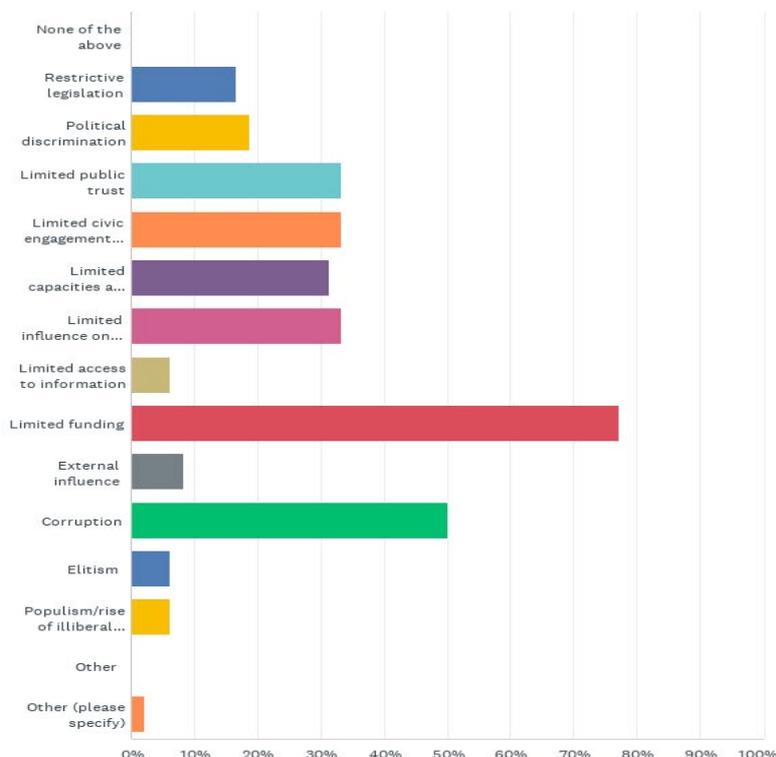
When it comes to three major challenges the country is facing in the nearest future, the majority of respondents indicated corruption and the lack of transparency (72.92% of votes), the failing economy/poverty (62.50%), and the eroding trust in institutions (47.92%).

Q18 What do you see as the main challenge for your country in the nearest future? (choose max 3)



The perception of the socio-political environment was also directly linked to the problems identified in the civil society sector. The three key challenges named by the respondents included the issue of limited financial resources (77.08%), corruption (50%), the limited impact on policymaking (33.33%) and limited civic engagement (33.33%).

Q19 What do you see as the main challenges for civil society in your country? (choose max 3)



Asked how the EU could address the major challenges ahead of the country and facing its civil society, respondents pointed to the need to foster discussions, encourage policy dialogue, and promote quality media.

The need to help increase the level of trust towards institutions, support of overall economic development and the healthcare system were cited as well.

Furthermore, several respondents indicated youth programs as one of the priorities for cooperation. According to CSO representatives, more focus is needed to support critical-thinking skills and youth-based initiatives.

“[The EU could help address the major challenges by] creating the infrastructure for young people to grow and develop as active citizens, who are interested in decision-making processes; through youth centers; through informal education and support to NGOs that develop conditions and services for young people,” wrote a CSO representative.

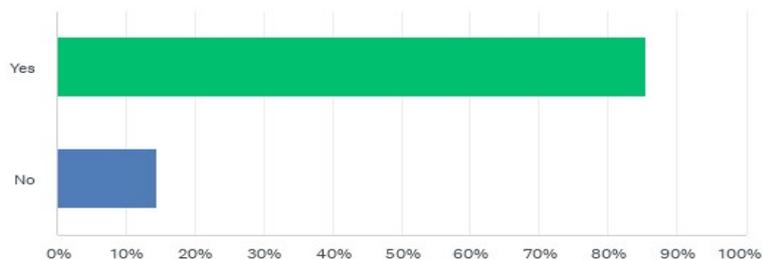
Finally, respondents pointed to the need to strengthen the organizational capacity of local NGOs to access and manage EU funds, and advocated for more funding opportunities beyond the current schemes.

“The EU needs to change its funding policies for the Eastern Partnership countries and give more NGOs the opportunity to implement projects under the Eastern Partnership umbrella,” said one of the CSO representatives.

Awareness and Perception

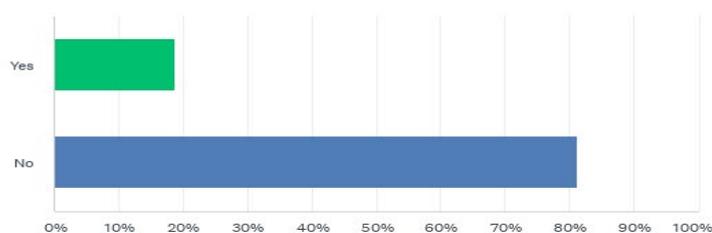
85% of respondents indicated familiarity with the Eastern Partnership program – which is the lowest score among the surveyed countries.

Q9 Have you heard of the European Union's Eastern Partnership Initiative?



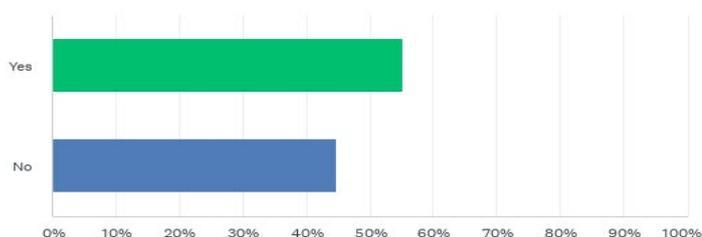
However, 82.5% of civil society respondents did not hear about the Eastern Partnership's new policy document: Beyond 2020. The result indicates the need for further promotion efforts.

Q12 Have you heard about the Eastern Partnership's policy framework "Beyond 2020"?



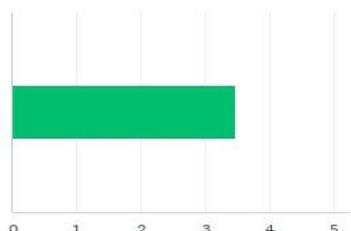
Also, just slightly above half of respondents had heard about the climate policy objective of the Eastern Partnership program – which is the highest score among the surveyed countries.

Q13 Have you heard about the Eastern Partnership's policy objective on climate resilience?



The overall cooperation with the EU was assessed at 3.4 – which indicates a fairly high score when compared to those of the other countries covered in this report.

Q14 How would you assess the current state of cooperation between your country and the European Union within the framework of Eastern Partnership? (1 the lowest score - 5 the highest score)



PART II

Qualitative research, round table discussions, and extensive interviews with civil society representatives on the right side of the Dniester River have revealed a number of issues that hinder the sector’s operations and impactful participation in the Eastern Partnership framework.

Funding and Trust

Moldova’s civil society sector is dominated by large organizations that serve as an intermediary between donors and the rest of civil society. While this model allows new players into the field, it also has shortcomings. Large NGOs from the capital city may not be familiar with local operational environments, fully aware of regional sensitivities, local knowledge and experience. In addition, grassroots organizations often find themselves in the position of an implementer, fulfilling the requirements set from above rather than having a seat at the table and in the decision-making process.

“The current grant-distribution mechanism – through a few big organizations – is not good and limits opportunities for new topics and new organizations. Moldova needs a different scheme,” a respondent commented.

Another issue is that it is still largely donors that create the agenda for civil society and set up major themes for support. It’s currently difficult for CSOs to operate beyond a project-based framework.

“As long as a project is under implementation, the organization can survive, develop capacities and knowledge, pay salaries and taxes, and implement activities. Once the project is finished – all the resources are lost,” complained one of the respondents.

In light of that, activists have advocated for more core granting opportunities and the need for institutional support for CSOs that would allow them to bring up new issues they see relevant for their local communities. As a result, they could reconnect with the society and build some basic trust.

Another issue appears when donor dependency is accompanied by a shift in which CSOs become more accountable to the donor rather than their local community. This type of dependency undermines public trust in CSOs and makes them vulnerable to populist backlash. In the past years, there were attempts to introduce a strict piece of legislation that would limit the space for CSOs that were portrayed by some political stakeholders as foreign agents. Although with the new government in power this is no longer the

case, some political elites still encourage distrust towards the sector.

“Now we are safe for a few years, but the situation may change. If a significant portion of the political stakeholders consider CSOs to be foreign agents then this is a perennial risk for CSOs when those people come to power,” explained a CSO representative.

To create more trust between CSOs and local communities, the government would be wise to provide more opportunities for local funding – especially in the field of service provision. Participatory planning could also be used as a tool to engage civil society without taking too many resources. For their part, NGOs should also attempt to focus more on community engagement.

Limited Access to Policymakers

Although the elected government’s switch to a pro-European political party gave hope for Moldova’s civil society to have a bigger say in the country’s policies, respondents complained that access to policymakers has not met their expectations. The government, according to interviewees, appears ready to sacrifice the need for public consultations and civil society contributions, for the sake of speeding up reform. At the same time, there is a widespread expectation from the side of civil society that new legislation and the content of the reforms should be widely consulted on and explained to the public rather than being adopted in a hasty manner. The mistrust of civil society, they stress, is a result of years of incompetence and corruption of previous governments – regardless of their geopolitical orientation.

Furthermore, CSO representatives complained that challenges remain in engaging the government in a running dialogue that includes constructive feedback.

“It is still early to make an assessment regarding the engagement of CSOs and openness of public authorities. Nevertheless, there were several cases when the civil society criticized the actions of the government. Unfortunately, the reply of the government was aggressive. The main problem is that they continue to ignore the rules of transparency, they avoid public consultations. If they go on with this approach, they will lose credibility and the support of the society,” commented one of the respondents.

Therefore, more opportunities for participation and dialogue with both central and local authorities remain a key issue for the country’s civil society.

“There was an initiative some time ago for an amendment to the Administrative Code that would allow civil society organizations to contest in court the decisions or regulations adopted by local authorities. Initially, the initiative was supported by the government, but later it was abandoned, because in their minds this would give CSOs too much freedom and maneuver of action. Instead, frankly speaking, this would have been an opportunity to make CSOs more participatory,” added another respondent.

Civil Society Legislation and Donor Requirements

Although, recently, there have been changes to the NGO legislation, it still does not sufficiently differentiate between NGOs and businesses, and many organizations run into trouble when they try to follow the complicated accounting rules. Furthermore, it is virtually impossible for unregistered initiative groups to receive funding.

Reporting requirements by major donors are also an issue as the complexities of the bureaucratic rules may create additional obstacles for new organizations to become active recipients of such funds.

Migration and brain drain

The Republic of Moldova is one of the countries suffering the most from the ‘brain-drain’ phenomenon.

It is estimated that every fourth Moldovan works abroad.⁵¹ Despite progress in recent years, according to the World Bank, 23% of Moldovans live below the poverty line. This affects their ability and willingness to devote time to unpaid community work. In light of the difficult socio-economic situation, many Moldovans choose to emigrate in their search for a better life instead of getting involved in civic and political activity. As a result, personnel deficits and skill shortages are a common issue in the civil society sector.

Regional inequalities

With most CSOs concentrated in Chisinau, resources are largely directed to the capital city. Although major donors have in recent years paid more attention to the regions, funding opportunities still remain relatively scarce. Furthermore, local organizations find it challenging to meet all the application and reporting requirements. Hence capital-based NGOs often play the role of intermediaries and offer sub-granting. But the current scheme is not sufficient to create vibrant and sustainable regional CSOs.

The centralization of the government also hinders the potential impact on local authorities and its policies. As administrative resources and public services remain concentrated in the capital city, regional governments are confronted by their limited financial autonomy.

Cooperation with the EU

Although both the Eastern Partnership Forum and the Association Agreement structures provide for ample opportunities for local CSOs to engage in advocacy with European stakeholders, few Moldovan organizations take advantage of these resources.

“Moldovan CSOs make the mistake of seeing the EU only as a donor. Meanwhile, it’s not just about funding. A lot of decisions are taken at the EU level,” said one of the respondents. “The EU provides us with platforms to have input sharing and it’s up to us, the CSOs, to use this opportunity and organize ourselves for better advocacy,” the representative added.

51 Deutsche Welle (2018). “Moldova Fights Brain Drain with Tech Startups, Social Activism.” <https://www.dw.com/en/moldova-fights-brain-drain-with-tech-startups-social-activism/a-46144714>

The Transnistria Conflict

Following a civil war in the early nineties, Moldova has been locked in an unresolved frozen conflict. The ceasefire of 1992 cemented the presence of Russian armed forces in Transnistria as a “peacekeeping force,” and provided Moscow with leverage to influence domestic Moldovan politics.

The local separatists established a quasi-independent structure on the left bank of the Dniester River which continues to operate up to today even though it is officially not recognized by any country, including Russia. Chisinau has no judicial and political control over the territory. Although the political dialogue in the 5+2 format is continuing, no significant progress has been achieved so far. At first glance, local civil society in Transnistria looks quite vibrant, but few organizations remain independent and the whole sector operates in a rather hostile environment⁵². Many CSOs work in close cooperation with the de-facto authorities and perceive the NGO sector more as a mechanism of receiving foreign grants rather than one of performing monitoring and watchdog functions. They are supported by the de-facto authorities themselves who encourage the flow of foreign funding to the region – such as development assistance.

At the same time, the work of organizations and activists involved in politically sensitive topics, like freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, is strictly limited.

As a result of this policy, there’s little public control over the actions of the de-facto authorities and limited information on ongoing rights violations which has led to increasing impunity. The “foreign agent law” that was introduced by the de-facto regime in 2018 further contributes to the crippling civil society and reducing its watchdog role. The law prohibits foreign-funded NGOs from engaging in broadly defined “political activity” and thus allows the de-facto regime to control the distribution of funds and ensures that only those loyal to the de-facto authorities can cooperate with foreign donors.

In this context, providing development assistance on the left bank and not tying it to progress on human rights issues appears problematic as it further strengthens and legitimizes the de-facto regime’s strategy of keeping civil society in check. The same applies to the funding schemes within the confidence-building measures that prioritize providing services or social welfare projects and do not support human-rights oriented initiatives due to their potential sensitive nature. As such, they contribute to impunity of the de-facto authorities.

Furthermore, the recent worsening of the situation in the region, within which the de-facto regime started a series of persecutions of its critics (activists and journalists), shows that the policy of ignoring human rights issues does not contribute to the stability in the region. The lack of support has resulted in a situation where there is only one organization in Transnistria that could provide reliable information about rights violations and assist the victims.

Recommendations for the EU

- Continue applying conditionality and the “more-for-more principle” to Moldova’s reform agenda.

52 Zamejc, A. Tersi, E. Komm, T. “Under the Spotlight: A Close Look into the Emerging and Established Civil Society Actors in Moldova and the South Caucasus.” Retrieved online from: <https://www.peopleinneed.net/building-a-civil-society-in-moldova-and-the-south-caucasus-7994gp>

- To contribute to the development of a healthy and sustainable civil society sector, lower the barriers of entry and support local CSOs in the country's regions. Invest in programs that empower local, community-based organizations in their ability to independently identify and communicate issues and take part in policy and strategic processes as a strong advocate. These programs should continue to evolve in a way that strengthens the position of local CSOs in their relationships with donors, policymakers and large national actors
- For CSOs that rely on foreign funding, reduce the administrative burden of grants wherever possible and offer core funding with a focus on community engagement. This could free up more staff time for building essential community links and increasing public trust in CSOs
- Provide additional resources for the establishment of a multi-annual financial framework for regional cooperation and for the exchange of experiences – in particular between Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine
- The unresolved conflict with the breakaway republic of Transnistria remains one of Moldova's greatest challenges. Continue supporting confidence-building measures between local civil societies when needed, but also do not hesitate to raise the issue of human rights violations in Transnistria. Provide space for discussions and critical assessments of the current policy approaches
- Support multi-stakeholder policy dialogue between the government, business, and civil society to discuss outstanding issues and reform priorities
- Provide further opportunities for the funding of grassroots organizations and unregistered voluntary-based movements within sub-granting schemes.
- Provide support to strengthen the advocacy and communication skills of CSOs
- As the reform agenda in Moldova becomes more complex, strengthen the institutional capacity of think tanks which help bring additional expertise into key policy areas
- Increase the efforts to raise the visibility of the Eastern Partnership framework in Moldova's informational space
- Make development assistance in Transnistria conditional on progress in the field of human rights
- In Transnistria, ensure that financial support is also directed and available to initiatives that work on human-rights related topics such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and access to information

UKRAINE

Kyiv, Ukraine, November 2013. Demonstration for European integration.
Credit: Shutterstock, Drop of Light.





UKRAINE

When the Eastern Partnership initiative was launched in 2009, Ukraine had already been involved in talks with the EU for two years over an upgraded cooperation agreement and, since 2008, over visa liberalization⁵³. However, the program offered a significant political boost to those efforts and allowed Ukraine not only to focus on deepening its bilateral ties, but also on developing stronger relations with other countries in the region⁵⁴.

Signed in March 2014, the landmark Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU committed the country to pursuing key reforms in the judicial, economic, and other sectors. It also included the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) that aims to increase the trading of goods and services by cutting tariffs and harmonizing the country's standards and norms with those of the EU.

The historic document was originally supposed to be signed a year before, but then President Victor Yanukovich unexpectedly withdrew from the deal, prompting the large-scale Euromaidan protests that eventually removed him from power.

Although the ratification process on the side of the EU was initially stalled by the Dutch, the Association Agreement was provisionally applied in 2016 and finally came into force a year later. Only between 2016 and 2019, Ukraine's trade with the EU increased by 48% to 43.3 billion EUR and the bloc remains the country's biggest trade partner⁵⁵.

Given the proximity of Ukraine to the EU and the fact that it is bordering two autocratic regimes that could potentially endanger European security, for EU member states, Ukraine has a special strategic importance.

However, despite a lot of positive developments stemming from the Eastern Partnership program, the uncertain prospects for Ukraine's future membership in the EU has added to a growing sense of frustration among the public, civil society, and official authorities. According a recent survey from the Razumkov Center, 61.9% of Ukrainians support the idea of the country's accession into the bloc⁵⁶.

Four years on, however, the country's progress on the reform path has been slow. The main issues are the unfinished judiciary and rule-of-law reform, endemic corruption, and the continued influence of oligarchs on the political processes in the country.⁵⁷ Although the media environment remains relatively competitive and diverse, many outlets are controlled by oligarchs who use them as a way to influence politics and advance their own business interests⁵⁸.

Domestic challenges notwithstanding, the last seven years have been very difficult for Ukraine. After the Yanukovich regime collapsed in 2014 and new interim authorities made it clear that Kyiv would seek to

53 Bazhenova, H. (2019). "Ukraine w Partnerstwie Wschodnim: Osiągnięcia i Perspektywy." Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe. Instytut Europy Środkowej. Retrieved online from: https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/riesw_2019-2-03_0.pdf

54 Ibidem

55 Countries and Regions: Ukraine. European Commission. Retrieved online from: <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/ukraine/>

56 (2021). "Public support of the Euro-Atlantic Course of Ukraine: assessments and recommendations." Razumkov Center. Retrieved online from: <https://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2021-nato-ukr.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0Gxqx4bTnax04AeuYzCiqKgd-XQYRsFduFJoRcyND2QIG6ql14jvw-4rc>

57 Aldershoff, W. "Ukraine's EU Association Agreement Obliges Kyiv to Pursue Rule of Law Reforms." Atlantic Council. Retrieved online from: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-eu-association-agreement-obliges-kyiv-to-pursue-rule-of-law-reforms/>

58 Korbut, A. (2021). "Strengthening Public Interest in Ukraine's Media Sector." Chatham House. Retrieved online from: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/04/strengthening-public-interest-ukraines-media-sector/04-influences-ukraines-media>

strengthen ties with the EU, Russia seized and annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Shortly afterwards, pro-Russian separatists, supported by Moscow, declared independence in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine. Fighting between the pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian army ensued and escalated into a full-scale armed conflict. Although a major ceasefire was brokered by France and Germany in 2015 and some prisoner exchanges have taken place, periodic clashes have continued to kill people on both sides. According to Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs, by May 2021, some 14,000 servicemen and civilians have lost their lives as a result of the war⁵⁹. The death toll includes at least 3,393 civilians⁶⁰.

Along with the war, a major humanitarian crisis has unfolded in Ukraine. According to official figures, some 2 million people were forced to leave their homes and some 1.5 million have remained displaced⁶¹. Seven years since the beginning of the conflict, 3.4 million people are "in need of sustained humanitarian assistance"⁶².

Additionally, the recent buildup of some 90,000 Russian troops near Ukraine's border has brought new concerns that the Kremlin may be seeking to launch another invasion.

On top of the current military conflict, since 2014, Ukraine has also been subjected to increased cyberattacks, including power blackouts and ransomware considered to be directed from Moscow.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has added yet another front to the long list of Ukraine's woes. With the rising rates of infection and some 800 deaths daily, from July through mid-November 2021, the virus has already killed more people than the last seven years the war in Donbas has⁶³.

Although challenges abound, Ukraine's civil society remains "a strong pillar" and has been instrumental in tackling the effects of both the COVID-19 crisis and the ongoing Russian involvement in the conflict in the East of the country⁶⁴. Ukrainian CSOs enjoy operational space though there have been cases of persecution and attacks against civic activists⁶⁵.

Local civil society has also been perceived as a key driving force of reform, pushing for the implementation of the Association Agreement and increasing government's transparency.

Compared to other countries in the region, Ukrainian NGOs enjoy a relatively high level of public trust. According to a recent survey, 63% of respondents expressed trust towards voluntary organizations and 47% towards NGOs⁶⁶.

Unfortunately in recent years, civil society activists, especially those in the regions involved in

59 (2021). "Two Ukrainian Soldiers Killed in Eastern Ukraine." Reuters. Retrieved online from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-casualties-idUSKBN2BTOKV>

60 (2021). "Conflict-Related Civilian Casualties in Ukraine: report." United Nations Human Rights; Office of the High Commissioner. Retrieved online from: <https://ukraine.un.org/en/151093-conflict-related-civilian-casualties-ukraine-8-october-2021>

61 Nieczypor, K. (2019). "In the Shadow of War: Ukraine's Policy Towards Internally Displaced Persons." Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich. Retrieved online from: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2019-01-16/shadow-war-ukraines-policy-towards-internally-displaced>

62 (2021). "Eastern Ukraine Situation Will Remain Fragile Without Means to Calm Mounting Tensions, Under-Secretary General Tells Security Council." United Nations Press Release. Retrieved online from: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14434.doc.htm>

63 Nemtsova, A. (2021) "A Covid Mega Surge on Top of Putin's War is Creating Hell on Earth." Daily Beast. Retrieved online from: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/a-covid-19-crisis-and-putins-war-push-ukraine-to-breaking-point>

64 (2021). "Nations in Transit: Ukraine." Freedom House. Retrieved online from: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/nations-transit/2021>

65 Ibidem.

66 (2020). "Початок нового політичного року: довіра до соціальних інститутів." Razumkov Centr. Retrieved online from: <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/pochatok-novogo-politychnogo-roku-dovira-do-sotsialnykh-instytutiv-lypen-2020r>

environmental, anti-corruption, and LGBTI work, have been increasingly facing physical attacks and even threats to their lives. The threats reportedly have come primarily from local authorities and oligarchs who enjoy impunity and protection from the side of law enforcement. The murder of Kataryna Handziuk in 2018 in Kherson was the most shocking example of how unprotected and vulnerable the activists in the region can be.

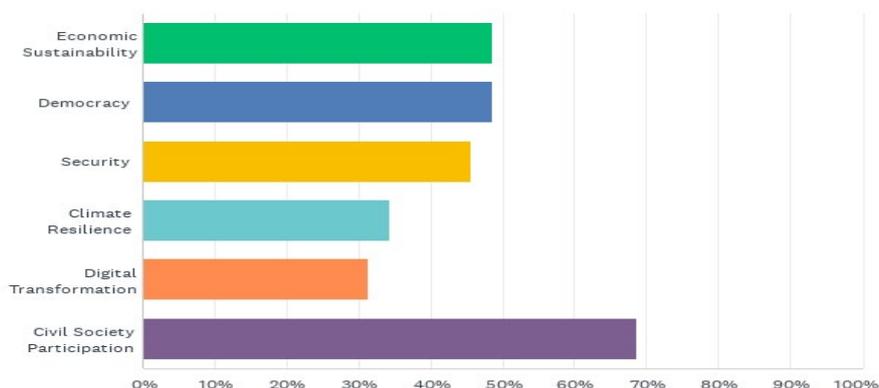
PART I

Survey Results

Conducted in the summer of 2021, the following online opinion survey was filled out by 35 representatives of Ukrainian civil society from across various fields. For more detailed demographic profiles, see the methodology chapter.

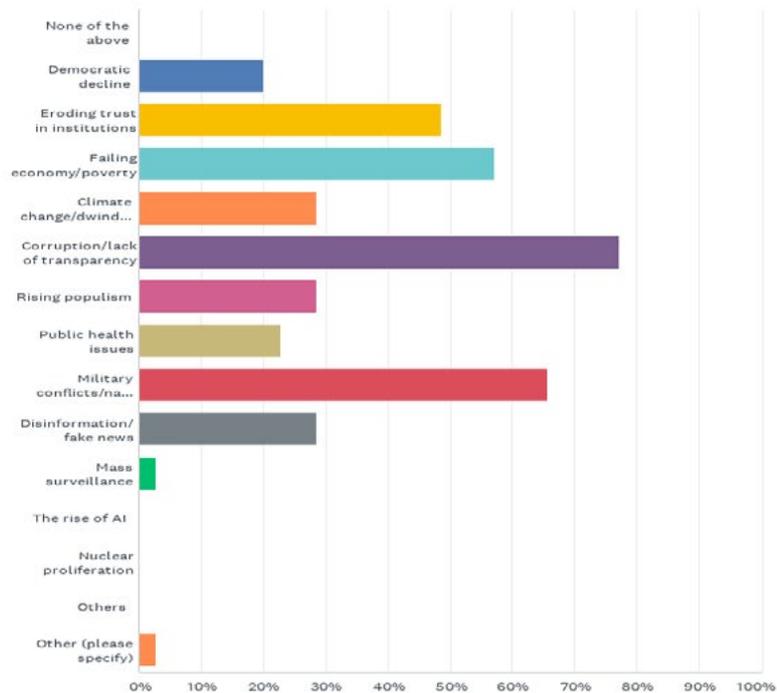
According to survey participants, the top priority areas for EU support in Ukraine are civil society participation (68.57%), democracy and economic sustainability (both received 48.57% of votes), and security (45.71%).

Q15 Which areas should the EU focus on more in your country? (choose max 3)



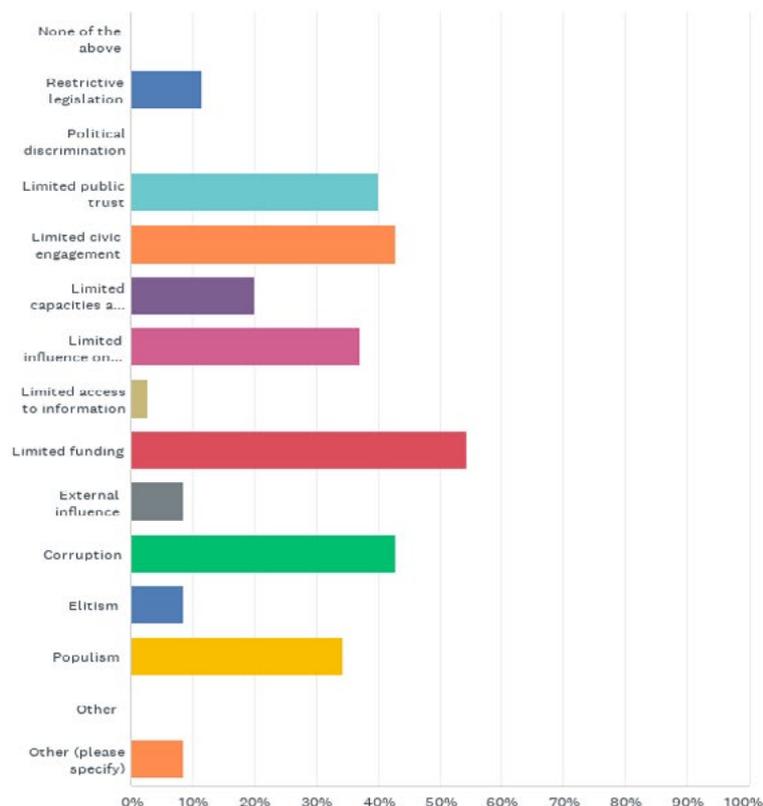
When it comes to the three main challenges facing the country, the majority of the respondents pointed to corruption/the lack of transparency (77.14%), military conflicts/national threats (65.71%), and the failing economy/poverty (57.14%).

Q18 What do you see as the main challenge for your country in the future? (choose max 3)



Similar to the results in the other surveyed countries, the majority of the Ukrainian respondents indicated limited funding as the major problem for the third sector (54.29%). Corruption (42.86%) and its limited influence on policymakers (37.14%) ranked second and third, respectively.

Q19 What do you see as the main challenges for civil society in your country? (choose max 3)



When asked how the EU can help address the ongoing and future challenges, respondents called for more support for the reform process, increased consultations and funding for the third sector, and more opportunities for small and medium businesses.

“[There is a need for] greater pressure [on the government] to conduct reforms and fulfill the obligations before EU partners; Increase funding for capable NGOs that have shown practical success, as well as results. Provide grants for small business,” one respondent wrote.

“Involve NGOs more in policy-making, provide funding for NGOs to promote socially-oriented reforms that are not the top priorities of the current government (or where there is pushback, such as the reform of deinstitutionalization of alternative childcare),” another survey participant added.

Some respondents also called for greater attention to the regions of Ukraine and further resources to strengthen the capacities of regional CSOs.

“Promote the development of the regional component of civil society without the participation of Kyiv-based NGOs,” one survey participant commented.

Other voices advocated for increased sanctions against the Russian Federation in connection with Moscow’s support to the pro-Russian separatists in the Eastern regions of Ukraine.

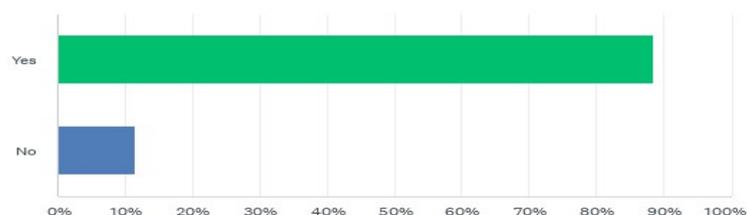
Finally, beyond advocating for a clear roadmap for Ukraine’s accession to the EU and supporting its defense capabilities, some also called for caution when it comes to having to adjust to EU standards, particularly in the area of climate policies.

“Do not advocate for policies that threaten Ukraine’s economic security, in particular with regard to decarbonization - the transition should not be a shock therapy process,” one respondent wrote.

Awareness and Perception

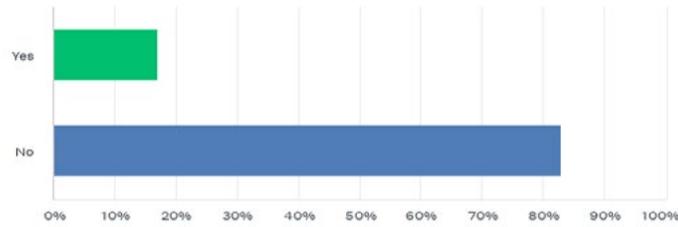
88.57% of respondents indicated familiarity with the Eastern Partnership program – the second lowest result among the surveyed countries.

Q9 Have you heard of the European Union’s Eastern Partnership Initiative? (Yes/No)



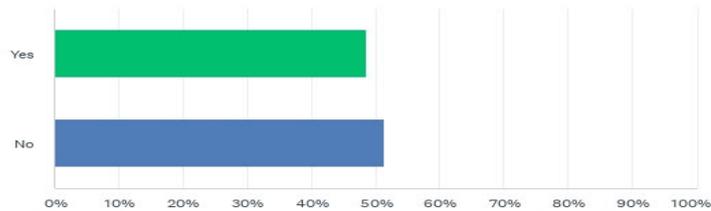
However, as of the summer of 2021, only 17% of respondents heard of the new policy document adopted in March. The number is the lowest score among the surveyed countries.

Q12 Have you heard about the Eastern Partnership's policy framework "Beyond 2020"?



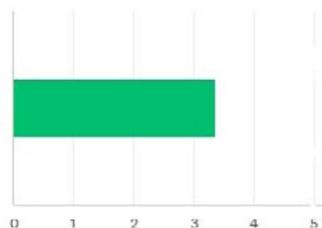
Nearly half of the respondents (49%) were aware that climate issues were part of the Eastern Partnership goals.

Q13 Have you heard about the Eastern Partnership's policy objective on climate resilience?



Overall, respondents ranked Ukraine's cooperation with the EU at 3.3 out of 5 points.

Q14 How would you assess the current state of cooperation between your country and the European Union within the framework of Eastern Partnership? (1 the lowest score and 5 the highest score)



PART II

Qualitative research, including round table discussions and extensive interviews with civil society representatives in Ukraine, revealed a number of issues that pose a challenge for the sector's operations, its ongoing participation in the Eastern Partnership framework, and future impact.

A Lack of Perspective for EU Accession

For many Ukrainian civil society representatives, the Eastern Partnership program looks incomplete without a vision for the future membership in the EU.

“The signing of the Association Agreement was seen in Ukraine as just the first step towards accession to the bloc. For us, the Eastern Partnership was a trampoline or a bridge to get us there,” explained one respondent who said that, in the eyes of civil society, the framework for cooperation is becoming obsolete without further integration goals.

“Now everyone talks about the crisis of the Eastern Partnership simply because it doesn't offer any perspective for future accession. So why does it still exist?” another respondent commented.

Amidst the ongoing domestic challenges in the EU and lack of consensus among member states about the future direction of the bloc, there is an understanding among civil society members that - in the nearest future - the chances for a major policy change towards Eastern Partnership members are rather slim. However, many say that an additional level of cooperation will be needed to increase the country's motivation for reform.

“The ball is in Brussels' court. Currently, the format is not tailored made to the needs of the member countries. We want more for more, and we need to see some advanced mechanism for those who deliver on their commitments,” said one respondent.

Another civil society representative suggested that in the absence of a perspective membership, sectoral integration could be the game changer Ukraine needs.

“We have the Association Agreement, a comprehensive roadmap for reform, but at the same time, to be more integrated, we could aim for closer integration in specific areas such digital, energy, and justice policies. In those realms, we would like to see a more tailored-made approach from the EU,” one respondent said.

Association Trio and the Need for Policy Differentiation

Given the sheer size of the country and the complexities of its problems, some respondents argued that Ukraine needs more attention and support from the EU.

“The problem lies in the position of Ukraine within the Eastern Partnership, which is not proportional with regards to the financial support and attention at the international level. It doesn't take into account the geographic size and importance of the country. For example, Ukraine is ten times bigger than Georgia. The current format of cooperation should be transformed so that Ukraine has more say,” argued one respondent.

Others acknowledged that such a tailored-made approach could be just as well realized through the Association Trio which was signed between Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova to advance their common interests for European integration.

“The Association Trio is like the Visegrad Group established in the nineties that brought together Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia to unite their efforts towards future EU membership. There

are lot of differences between us, but this diplomatic format is definitely the right step," a civil society representative said.

"Policymakers in Brussels fear that this separation of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova could result in the neglecting of the other three, but this is exaggerated because the EU could simply show more flexibility and adjust its policies and resources to the needs on the ground," one respondent added. „We really need a separate policy for these three countries. It will give some more steam for the authorities to do a better work," the same responded added.

Meanwhile, according to some civil society representatives, "Beyond 2020," the new policy document that brings with it a new agenda to the framework of the Eastern Partnership, does not adequately reflect the ongoing divergence between the various Eastern Partnership member states.

"The result of the new deliverables is still very vague, with no clear cut distinction between those countries who have an Association Agreement and those who could try to take a back seat on these issues," one respondent commented.

The Need for "More for More" and a Return to a Value-Based Approach

During the round table event and personal interviews, civil society representatives also drew attention to the importance of pressure from the EU to keep the government on the path of reform that are underpinned by European Union values.

"Contrary to conventional wisdom, Ukraine is not well advanced on its goal towards EU integration. Due to the commitments already delivered, we may be considered in first place among the Eastern Partnership countries, but it's not the result we expect from Ukraine," argued a respondent.

"In the past, there was a Visa Liberalisation Plan for Ukraine which included a number of criteria that the country had to fulfill. It was a well-functioning tool that consisted of a number of reforms and laws that were the precondition for the introduction of a visa-free regime with the EU. At the moment, the Association Agreement is not as consistent as the EU is not pushing Ukraine enough," another respondent commented.

"The data presented by the Government of Ukraine and non-governmental experts about the fulfillment of the rules stated in the Association Agreement also vary," the respondent added, calling for a better monitoring mechanism that could hold the government to account and a stricter „more-for-more" policy that is tied to future funding.

For some civil society activists, the case in point is the slow pace of the judiciary reform.

"The EU is attempting to help with the reform of the judiciary, but a clear-cut position of our international partners is lacking. While Ukraine previously received assistance only after fulfilling certain conditions, this scheme seems to have weakened over the last year," a respondent said.

"The values and their practical application in Ukraine, which are the preconditions of the EU's assistance, do not underpin mutual cooperation to the extent they did before. It concerns, for example, the justice reform. The principle of conditionality that had proved itself in the past, doesn't seem to work so well anymore," observed a representative of civil society.

Technical Capacity and Monitoring

Another issue voiced by representatives from civil society concerned human resources and their capacities to implement complex directives and policy harmonization acts.

“We still do not have an adequately prepared civil service to carry things out properly and to absorb all the funding and assistance. It’s either at the level of parliament, where we still have a problem to draft proper legislation for the implementation of the Association Agreement, and, also, at the level of the government and the implementation of decisions by the executive branch,” a respondent commented, calling on the EU to increase technical assistance for Ukraine.

However, as respondents pointed out, it is equally important to ensure first that institutions are able to absorb the assistance and that they have proper internal procedures in place.

“Sometimes international technical assistance programs simply sustain old structures that are in need of an upgrade. In terms of this cooperation with the EU, they enjoy a certain kind of impunity. But in fact, they should be reformed first and only then be supported,” argued a respondent.

„There needs to be a proper monitoring mechanism that looks into the spending of EU funds in Ukraine. The level of corruption is still high and a lot of money is wasted,” another respondent added.

Perception of the EU

“The European Union’s reputation remains relatively high. However, increasingly, we hear voices from the public that it is the US, not the EU, which is a real ally and partner for Ukraine,” said a respondent.

In fact, the issues connected to the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine and the occupation of Crimea are both important factors influencing the perception of the European Union by the public and civil society – especially in the context of the EU’s economic cooperation with Russia.

“There is a certain amount of disappointment and a feeling of there being double standards. While the EU is trading with Russia and pushing for the Nord Stream [2] pipeline, it is simultaneously reprimanding Moscow for its role in the conflict in Ukraine,” a civil society respondent said.

Regional Differentiation and the Availability of Funding

While NGOs doing research and analytical work play a big role in supporting the country’s harmonization of legislation with EU standards and proposing policy solutions to solve local problems, according to some respondents, they have been increasingly facing shortages in funding.

“There was a period when the European Commission was announcing a lot of grant competitions – from 2004 till 2015, till the beginning of the war. Then donors changed its policies, Ukraine started getting closer to the EU and more money went into the government. There was also more attention towards eastern Ukraine and human rights NGOs. Unfortunately those who were doing research, or economic and political analysis saw a big decrease in the availability of funding,” said a representative of the National Platform who argued for the return of grant competitions for analytical NGOs and think tanks.

“For big policy-oriented organizations in Kyiv, it is easier to get funding because they are literally at the door of the ministries. But for region-based NGOs doing policy analysis, it’s much harder to get support,” the respondent commented.

National Platform

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, most activities of the Eastern Partnership platform, in particular international events and gatherings, have moved to an online format. Unfortunately, according

to civil society representatives, it has had a negative impact on its ability to function.

“Online formats for cooperation are simply ineffective,” commented one respondent.

“Yes, you can hold working group discussions online and still get something out of it, but we can see that the energy of our members and activism have significantly decreased. There’s a growing sense of Zoom fatigue,” another respondent said.

Asked how to improve the work of the National Platform, activists also talked about the importance of available resources.

“The activities of the National Platform depend on financing and the organization that leads it. These two factors that are important, without them it doesn’t function. Regarding the organization that leads the Platform in Ukraine, there aren’t many issues. In terms of finances, we have a bigger problem,” a respondent said who advocated for more sustained financing of projects and the greater availability of technical assistance.

In the case of Ukraine, the question is also how to ensure participation of the bigger and more advanced groups.

“We have a lot of strong organizations in Ukraine and it would be great if they shared their expertise with the Platform. Some of them were part of it, but once they grew their skills and organizational capacities, they left. We need to think of better mechanisms on how to attract them back and what the platform itself could give them in return,” the representative added.

Recommendations for the EU

- Continue applying conditionality and the “more-for-more principle” when supporting Ukraine’s reform agenda
- Increase support to the judicial and anti-corruption reforms in Ukraine as a cornerstone of the reform process in the country
- Continue supporting the role of civil society in policy dialogue with the government, monitoring the reform process, and the performance of watchdog activities
- Provide additional financial resources for developing and strengthening regional cooperation between the Association Trio countries
- Increasing funding for the National Platform and its promotion
- Increase the promotion of the Eastern Partnership program in Ukraine, including its new policy framework “Beyond 2020”
- Increase funding and announce more grant competitions for policy-oriented organizations, with a particular focus on those operating in the regions
- Provide additional funding opportunities for civil society oversight of the reform process
- Ensure the participation of expert Ukrainian NGOs in the distribution of technical assistance to the government

CONCLUSION

The brand of the Eastern Partnership is facing an identity crisis. The last few years have shown that the interests of EaP states are diverging and they are increasingly looking for their own ways to engage with the European Union. A common approach, which was initially the basis of the initiative, is no longer applicable. Voices of civil society from the region confirm that it is time for the EU to show even more flexibility and to adopt a tailor-made approach to each case.

Even the frontrunners of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova – the “Association Trio” - which seek closer integration with the EU, show different political trajectories and have different needs.

There are, however, some similarities of how civil society across Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine view cooperation with the EU and what they consider to be the most pressing matters.

According to the online survey results, civil society participation and economic sustainability were marked among the top priorities for EU engagement in all countries. With their watchdog function and policy expertise, civil society advocates for greater involvement in policy dialogue and consultations, not only with national governments, but also with the EU. And recent years have shown that their role in the reform process has been truly indispensable.

The democracy dimension, as another policy goal, was selected as a top priority in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine. The internal dynamics in each of those countries do not always bode well for the future and some risk deviating from the democratic path.

In Ukraine and Armenia, security issues were also of prime concern – hardly a surprising result given the geopolitical realities of these two countries.

Despite the fact that green transition tops the agenda of policy discussion in the EU and climate resilience is one of the dimensions of the new policy document for the EaP program, climate issues still do not appear to be a priority for civil society in the EaP region. The sole exception being Moldova, where survey participants indicated that the climate goal was one of the three most important topics.

Also, despite the different levels of engagement in all of the EaP countries, the online questionnaire showed that some 90% of civic actors in the five survey states were familiar with the Eastern Partnership program. This could be considered a success of the initiative and its awareness-raising dimension.

However, most of the survey participants did not know of the new policy document, “Beyond 2020”, indicating that the EU should put additional efforts into the promotion of the new strategy.

Although the Eastern Partnership may be inevitably becoming a two-tiered project, civil society across the five countries agree that for local people, the EU’s biggest appeal has always lied in its values and embrace of democratic principles, as well as its use of soft power. Therefore, according to the voices from the ground, Brussels’ return to a value-based approach constitutes the best insurance policy for the turbulent times ahead and for engagement with its eastern neighbors.

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Chisinau, Moldova, April 2018, 2021. Demonstration for snap election.
Credit: Shutterstock, Firmu Films.



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