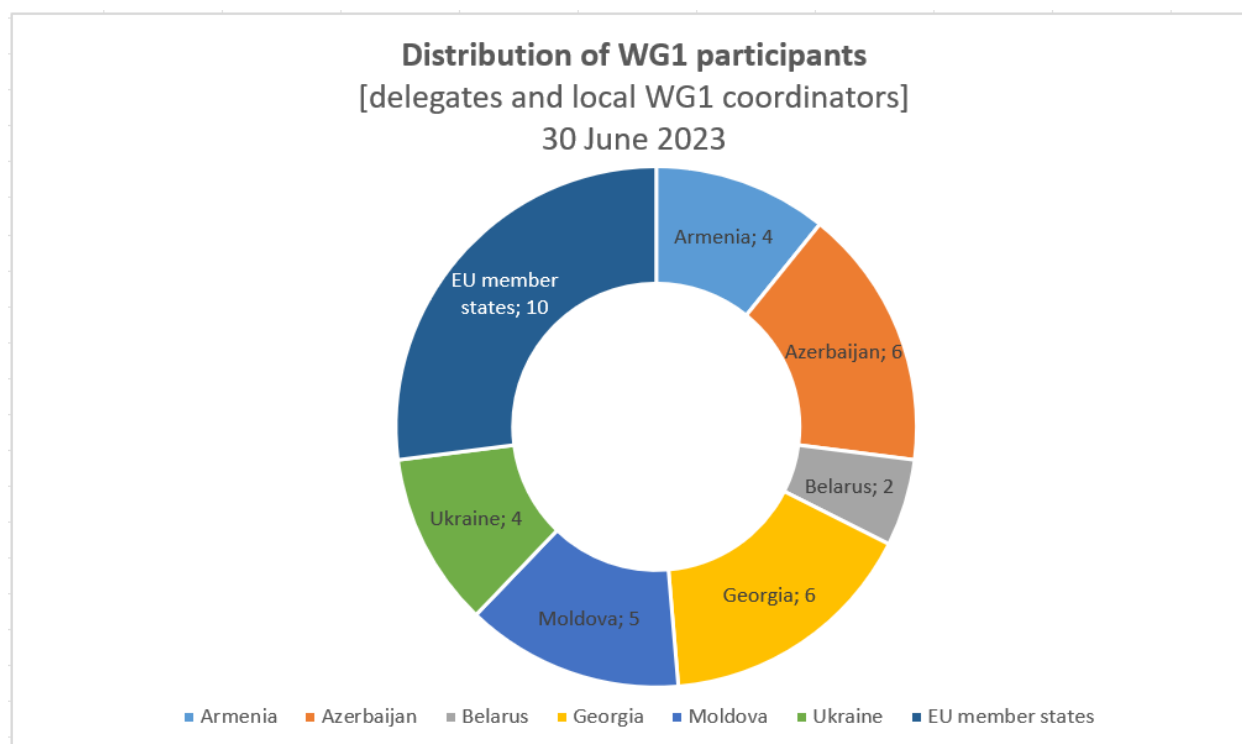


Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Working Group 1

Online Meeting, 30 June 2023

Report

EaP CSF Working Group 1 (WG1) met online on 30 June 2023. Spread over three online sessions, the meeting began with individual country updates and a brainstorming exercise on joint policy priorities. In the second session, the EaP CSF Secretariat staff members provided a comprehensive overview of the activities that the Forum organised throughout the first half of 2023 and discussed with delegates opportunities for joint advocacy. In the third and last session, delegates had the opportunity to discuss with representatives from the European External Action service questions pertaining to the interlink between security and democratisation in the EaP region. 37 participants (delegates from the 6 EaP countries and the EU as well as local WG coordinators) attended the meeting.



Session 1 – Introduction and Country Updates

Friday 30 June, 09:00-11:00 CEST

The introductory session began with an introduction of Pavel Havlicek, WG1 Coordinator, who provided an overview of the main developments on the EaP policy. His intervention was followed

by presentations on the main EaP country-level developments by WG1 coordinators from the 6 national platforms (NP) of the EaP CSF.

Country Updates

Pavel Havlicek, WG1 Coordinator, provided an overview of regional developments in the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy. During the Swedish presidency, stakeholders discussed the EU's approach to the EaP, leading to the conclusion that the current circumstances render the policy not fit for its intended purpose. Therefore, a thorough re-evaluation of the EaP policy remains necessary. Although the Swedish presidency achieved some successes, there were fewer activities for the EaP than expected. Under the Spanish EU presidency, engagement with Latin America takes priority, posing a challenge for the EaP's agenda. To maintain attention on the region, proactive outreach and persistence are essential.

The EaP is undergoing a significant rethinking process to enhance its design and regional cooperation format. Civil society's role remains vital, and efforts are ongoing to navigate the increasing diversity within the region, considering the fragmentation in countries like Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and the uncertainties surrounding Armenia and Azerbaijan. The EU continues to actively encourage engagement with democratic forces in Belarus.

Within the EU, development priorities are impacted by ongoing pressures from the Russian war, especially affecting Eastern European countries. Energy considerations, internal disputes over investment in Ukraine, and obstacles from countries like Hungary continue to influence public finance. Additionally, domestic issues such as the value agenda and rule of law in Poland, democracy in Hungary, Bulgaria, and Slovakia are also being addressed.

Lasha Tughushi (WG1 Coordinator – Georgia) started his intervention expressing support for Ukraine and confidence in their victory over the ongoing war. He mentioned that out of the 12 recommendations outlined by the EU, only three have been completed. Progress in the media field is particularly lacking. The main challenges for Georgia continue to face include legal reform, de-oligarchization, and de-polarization ahead of the upcoming elections. Tughushi emphasized the importance of civil society's involvement in finding solutions through dialogue with MPs and commented on the high involvement of the Georgian National Platform in the reform process. Security concerns arise from the Russian occupation and migration from Russia to Georgia, which needs urgent attention. He also urged for the resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.

Syuzanna Sghomonyan (WG1 Coordinator – Armenia) highlighted several critical concerns. She expressed apprehension about the local government elections, where allegations of bribery and arrests of non-ruling party candidates were reported. The current situation surrounding the elections remains alarming, including in connection to media freedom. Media coverage of instances of bribery led to legal proceedings against media outlets by the ruling party, limiting the freedom of independent media and straining their financial resources.

The ruling party did also not adequately respond to cases where police officers used physical force against attorneys. The police, now under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, should be held accountable for their actions. In April this year, the process that led to the election of the ombudsman sent disheartening and worrying signals to civil society, as the opposition's candidate faced physical attacks during the broadcasted election meeting.

On Lachin corridor, humanitarian aid remains blocked, as Russian peacekeepers did not fulfil their mission. The deployment of EU monitors was acknowledged positively. Lastly, Soghomonyan mentioned a joint working document developed between Armenia and the CEPA partnership committee, focusing on the rule of law and human rights. The government's collaboration with national CSOs in this context was deemed important.

Iulian Groza (in lieu of WG1 Coordinator from Moldova) provided an update on the country's progress regarding the 9 EU recommendations. Out of the 9 conditions to implement, 3 have been fulfilled, and 3 are in progress, particularly in the justice sector. Additional efforts are needed in areas such as anti-corruption, anti-money laundering legislation, and public administration reform. Moldovan EaP CSF NP members are monitoring the processes, but civil society representatives still need to be included in working groups on EU accession plans. The impact of the war in Ukraine has influenced Moldova's internal situation, and efforts are being made to achieve gas independence with the EU's assistance. Cybersecurity, tackling disinformation, and developing a national security strategy are priorities for the EU Partnership Mission in Moldova to address hybrid aggression from Russia.

Ziya Guliyev (WG1 Coordinator – Azerbaijan) shared civil society's concerns over the new media and political party laws. The Council of Europe partners have appealed to the Venice Commission to assess the impact of these laws. The new media law imposes restrictions, especially on freelance journalists, requiring registration and source disclosure. The political party law, under revision by the Venice Commission, demands re-registration and has citizenship issues. Political activists, particularly from human rights and business sectors, have faced arbitrary arrests and detentions. Negotiations for normalization with Armenia are ongoing with involvement from the United States and Russia. Corruption remains a concern, particularly within the court system. There are also rumours of preparations for constitutional referenda to change the electoral and administrative local governance systems.

Dzmitry Salauyou (WG1 Coordinator – Belarus) described a dire and worsening situation in the country. Over 40,000 people have been repressed, persecuted, and arrested, with an estimated 1481 political prisoners currently held. Families are afraid to provide information due to fear of further repression. Media representatives and Nobel peace prize laureates have been arrested and labelled as criminal groups. Political prisoners are subjected to torture, and some have died in prison without receiving proper medical aid.

Belarus has left the protocol on civil rights, depriving citizens of the opportunity to appeal to the Human Rights Court. Civil society is being purged, with over 1,000 NGOs dissolved, leaving no democratic organizations in the country. The new re-registration legislation will likely lead to the

demise of any remaining democratic parties. Belarus has not witnessed free and fair elections since the 1996 referendum and the dismantling of parliament. Regarding cooperation with Russia, there are concerns about the presence of Prigozhin in Belarus and uncertainty about the purpose of the Wagner group's deployment. When asked about the potential for change within the Belarusian population, emphasized that public opinion is not considered, and people do not want to participate in war or live under Putin's influence. However, due to severe repression and torture, protests and consolidation of opposition are becoming increasingly difficult.

Ruslan Havrylyuk (NP Coordinator – Ukraine) talked about the ongoing war against Ukraine and the importance of bringing decision-makers to the country regularly. Civil Society has been actively assisting the military, frontline efforts, and civilians. The focus is strongly kept on rebuilding Ukraine and European integration. The reconstruction of Ukraine should aim to bring the country closer to EU standards and norms. The Ukrainian NP is engaged in international events and participated in a recent London conference. Ukrainian CSOs needs to be provided with the necessary tools is essential for their watchdog role. The Forum and EaP countries should collaborate in supporting Ukraine and countering Russian aggression. Unity among civil society remains crucial, also when supporting sanctions against Russia, holding Russia accountable. and advocating for Ukraine's accession to EU and NATO. Moreover, he called for the cessation of Russia's representation in any European and international organizations.

During the **discussion**, participants raised various points of concern. One question focused on Ukraine's pursuit of ecocide recognition, emphasizing the need for international organizations' assistance in providing evidence for the international court. A point was made about toponyms and territorial issues in the Karabakh region. The impact of Russian interference with the democratization in Azerbaijan was discussed. Belarusian society's resilience amid challenges was noted, with some individuals leaving due to repression. Support from the EU to Ukraine was offered, with a request for a "wish list" of specific needs. Repetitive events in the region, the importance of monitoring developments after political changes, and the implementation of some EU recommendations in Moldova were also mentioned.

Session 2 – Joint advocacy opportunities within the EaP CSF

Friday 30 June, 11:30-12:30 CEST

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

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

- New staff members at the Secretariat
- WG Coordinator elections in WG2, WG3 and WG5

- Operational Capacity Assessment (OCA) of the EaP CSF and its NPs
- Implementation of Gender Mainstreaming Strategy (GMS)
 - GMS vision note adopted by the SC in April 2023
 - Gender focus points to be established, including NPs
 - Gender subgroups to be established at NP-level by 2024
- SHAPEDEM-EU (new Horizon Europe project in which EaP CSF is a partner alongside other international organisations, “Rethinking and reshaping the EU’s democracy support in its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods” more [here](#))
 - Pilot project “Democracy Learning Loop”
 - Living labs
 - Podcast
- External advocacy
 - Public events
 - Ad hoc advocacy
 - Contribution to EP reports and resolutions
 - Public statements
- Human Rights Dialogues
- Podcast cooperation with New Eastern Europe (journal)
- EaP Index (launch in autumn 2023)
- Annual Assembly (November 2023, Brussels)

During the discussion, various topics were raised, including ideas for the SHAPEDEM-EU format and stakeholder mapping for EaP CSF's members. Plans were outlined for creating a format where stakeholders can reshape the EU's external democracy support, with activities starting in 2024. Questions were raised about how to assess the impact of EaP CSF activities to influence decision-making process. The use of indicators and recent, positive stakeholder feedback was mentioned as methods for evaluating effectiveness. Colleagues from Azerbaijan shared their struggles with government repression and called for help on keeping high the attention on the imprisonment of Forum member Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu. The possibility of coalition work on Bakhtiyar’s case was discussed.

Session 3 – Stakeholder session - Strengthening security cooperation and democratisation in the EaP region: the EU's vital role in countering common threats.

Friday 30 June, 13:00-14:30 CEST

During this session, held under Chatham House rule, WG members discussed the EU's engagement in the EaP region as a promoter of security cooperation and democratisation, and as an ally of civil society’s inclusion and engagement in reform processes with **Dirk Schuebel**, EU Special Envoy for Eastern Partnership, European External Action Service and **Petra Gombalova**, Head of Division, European External Action Service

During the session, the importance of democracy and security in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region was emphasised. The security implications of Russian aggression brought a shift towards a bolder EU approach in the EaP region. Going forward, a clear definition of resilience is needed as well as strong support for the EaP countries in key areas, such as cybersecurity, border threats, and independent media. Positive developments were acknowledged, including progress on reforms in the Associated Trio countries, though Georgia still needed to meet criteria. Concerns were expressed about the shrinking space for civil society in Azerbaijan. Questions were raised about the impact of the EU's interventions on decision-making processes and the EU's leverage in addressing human rights issues in Azerbaijan. A new coordination mechanism with Belarusian democratic forces should help supporting Belarusian democratic forces and civil society. Civil society input in the accession process was also acknowledged as essential and mechanisms should be put in place to support civil society in this important role.

The EU is providing various forms of support to Ukraine, including military assistance and resilience-building measures. The need for long-term security guarantees for Ukraine was highlighted, as well as the London conference's role in mobilizing private sector involvement in Ukraine's reconstruction efforts.

The impact of Russian aggression on neighbouring countries and the potential risks of the situation in Russia were also discussed. Concerns were raised about the Zaporizhia nuclear power plant and the need for contingency plans.

Conclusions

Concluding the meeting, WG1 Coordinators Pavel Havlicek and Mikayel Hovhannisyan emphasized the interconnectedness of security and democratization in the EaP region. They encouraged proactive engagement from civil society and discussed the importance of addressing issues like freedom of speech, political freedoms, and anti-corruption measures to strengthen resilience against hybrid threats. Overall, the discussion provided valuable insights into the current challenges and opportunities in the EaP region.