
RESILIENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

Assessment of promotion and enhancing reforms process by the EU in the countries of the Eastern Partnership within priority “Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair and inclusive societies”

Policy brief



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Resilience of Civil Society and Media In the Eastern Partnership: Drive for Democracy & Inclusiveness

Policy brief

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The conclusions presented in the thematic brief are the sole responsibility of the "Ukrainian Prism" team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the EU and partners from the Eastern Partnership countries.

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Grants are available for CSOs from the Eastern Partnership and EU countries. Key areas of support are democracy and human rights, economic integration, environment and energy, contacts between people, social and labour policies.

Introduction

The post-2020 Eastern Partnership priority “Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies” has gained significant importance in recent years within the framework of the EU’s neighborhood policy and the ongoing processes in the target countries. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has underscored the necessity of building effective and resilient states, and fair societies amidst increasing global turbulence. Furthermore, across the Eastern Partnership region, there has been a growing demand from citizens to establish trustworthy relationships with the state and develop sustainable and robust institutions, as evident in regular appeals and statements from civil society. Ultimately, the issue of resilient, gender-equal, fair and inclusive societies has emerged as one of the crucial aspects of the reform agenda for states that have gained or aspire to gain candidate status for EU accession, as European institutions have identified these matters as foundational to the accession process.

The implementation of reforms in the countries of the Eastern Partnership gained a new basis of support from the EU in 2021 when the “Joint Staff Working Document – Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities” was published. This set of targets and tasks was United Europe’s response to the challenges that have arisen on the continent and in the neighbourhood policy region, given the Covid-19 pandemic and local political processes. The implementation of the revised priorities with a view to the terms of adoption should have begun in full in 2022. However, this time brought even greater political, social, economic and security challenges to the EU’s neighbourhood policy, caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Kremlin’s aggressive actions towards Europe in general. Accordingly, the already developed priorities had to receive new settings for implementation, which would not only enable their implementation in new circumstances but also respond to new challenges ad hoc. This requires the EU to have a new quality of involvement in the process of reforms in the countries of the Eastern Partnership and more active support for them.

This thematic brief is the fourth in a series of studies by the team of the project “Civic EaP Tracker: Monitoring EaP targets, deliverables and related reforms”, dedicated to the involvement of the EU in transformations in the countries of the Eastern Partnership. The research group seeks to analyse which aspects of the situation in the countries and which reforms the European institutions and EU representatives in the target countries paid attention to, how they adapted their actions in this context to the new political, social, economic and security circumstances, as well as how consistent the countries were in implementing reforms in response to Brussels’ reactions. For this purpose, data were collected on statements by European officials, official conclusions regarding the implementation of policies by EU institutions, and changed or newly established support mechanisms (programs, projects and funds), the addressees of which were partner countries.

Information was also collected on the laws and other legal acts adopted in the Eastern Partnership states and steps in their implementation related to the priorities of the “Joint Staff Working Document – Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities”. The analysis covered all the important events of 2022 in this context.

The study has a common framework for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Due to the de facto termination of the participation of Belarus (captured by a self-proclaimed authoritarian regime) as a state in the Eastern Partnership, the study will present a separate perspective of independent Belarusian civil society on the topic. This thematic brief is devoted to the processes in the area of priority “Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies”.

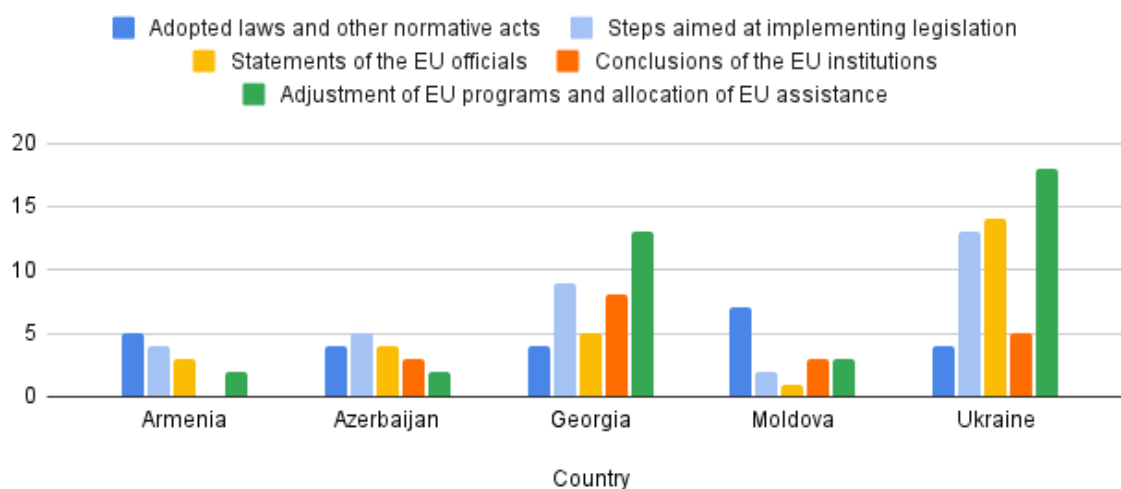
Accordingly, all the analysed information about the actions of the EU and reforms in the partner countries was related to the issues of this chapter of the Joint Staff Working Document.

Collected Data and Results

The results of data collection and categorization by the project team of the “Civic EaP Tracker: Monitoring EaP Targets, Deliverables, and Related Reforms” demonstrate that EU actors’ communication regarding resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies varied across Eastern Partnership countries in 2022. Among these countries, **Ukraine received the highest mention from EU officials, while the Republic of Moldova was the least mentioned.**

1.1. Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair and inclusive societies. EaP Countries' Reforms and EU Actions in 2022: General Data

Data: Civic EaP Tracker project team based on the information from the European institutions' and EaP governments' websites



The EU explicitly declared its efforts to assist displaced Ukrainian artists, scholars, and students, announcing program extensions and flexibility, as well as providing mechanisms and funding for humanitarian support in Ukraine.

Concerning fundamental rights, the EU acknowledged Ukraine’s successful implementation of approximately 80% of the recommendations from the Venice Commission. However, the adoption of a law on national minorities remained an outstanding area of attention. In summary, while significant progress has been made, there are still important tasks to be accomplished.

In case of Moldova, the statements voiced on 19 October 2022, at the thirteenth round of the annual Human Rights Dialogue in Brussels focused on the need for further reform of the media environment and further strengthening the legal framework for non-discrimination, by closing the existing legislative gaps and sustaining Moldova’s commitments to enhance gender equality and fight gender-based violence.

In Armenia, the EU addressed a wide range of human rights and fundamental freedoms, focusing on inclusivity, combating discrimination, and strengthening democracy. Topics such as gender equality, domestic violence, children’s rights, labour rights, detention conditions, freedom of expression, hate speech, disinformation, and the rule of law were discussed. The EU encouraged Armenia to make further progress in media freedom and committed to providing financial and technical assistance in key human rights areas, particularly in implementing the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

Regarding Azerbaijan, the EU pledged its support for Azerbaijani youth in education and employment. During a visit to Baku in July 2022, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen emphasized the importance of increased involvement of civil society and a

free and independent media in the EU-Azerbaijan relationship. The EU highlighted the need for an inclusive environment that promotes active civil society participation, upholds human rights, fundamental freedoms, and adheres to the rule of law based on international standards and commitments.

In Georgia, the EU stressed the significance of ensuring a free, professional, pluralistic, and independent media environment, and called for addressing criminal procedures against media owners to meet the highest legal standards. Media freedom was emphasized as a core element of democracy. The EU also recognized the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ individuals in Georgia, including discrimination and underreported violence, expressing solidarity with the community. To progress towards European Union membership, Georgia was urged to expedite reforms in areas such as the rule of law, independence of justice, and media freedom.

Apart from issuing statements, the EU also supported concrete steps, including projects and programs aimed at building resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies.

The most notable support was provided to Ukraine in response to the Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The European Commission is coordinating its largest ever operation under the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. All 27 EU countries, plus Norway, Türkiye, North Macedonia and Iceland, have offered in-kind assistance ranging from medical supplies and shelter items to vehicles and energy equipment. Since 24 February, the European Commission has allocated 523 million EUR for humanitarian aid programs to help civilians affected by the war in Ukraine. This includes respectively 485 million EUR for Ukraine and 38 million EUR for Moldova.

In Armenia, Team Europe donated 400,140 BioNTech-Pfizer vaccines, while the European Union approved disbursements of 14.2 million EUR in grants for the budget support programs: Support to Justice Sector Reforms and The Covid-19 Resilience Contract. These decisions were based on positive assessments of progress in sector reforms, macroeconomic stability, public financial management, and state budget transparency.

In Azerbaijan, the EU provided support to the Ministry of Education for the further development of National qualifications framework (NQF) Level 5 qualifications and strengthening the resilience of the education system. The Twinning Project aimed to strengthen the institutional capacity in the Mandatory Health Insurance (MHI) field, improve accessibility and quality of healthcare, reduce out-of-pocket payments, and align with the objectives of the Eastern Partnership and the World Health Organization (WHO). The EU also supported the Civil Society for Resilient and Safer Communities (CiSSCo) project, which focused on capacity building, and mental health services, empowering disadvantaged communities, and maintaining advocacy and dialogue between stakeholders.

In Georgia, the EU supported various initiatives, including the development of young civic activists, strengthening civil society participation in policy-making processes, promoting gender equality and women's rights, and improving health impact assessment practices. The EU also contributed to supporting a human rights-oriented security sector, combating gender-based and domestic violence, and promoting inclusive and sustainable economic development through grants and access to business support centers.

In Moldova, the EU, co-financed by Sweden through the East-Europe Foundation, launched a project aimed at inclusive and sustainable economic development. This project provided grants to civil society organizations and facilitated access to business support centers for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Additionally, the EU established a support fund for independent media organizations, ensuring the sustainability of objective, quality, and fact-based information production.

In Ukraine, for supporting Ukrainian researchers, the EU launched the 'European Research Area for Ukraine' (ERA4Ukraine) portal. This platform aims to provide information and support services to researchers based in Ukraine or those who have fled the country. It facilitates housing and job opportunities, diploma recognition, and other services, utilizing the existing EURAXESS network.

In terms of legal pathways to the EU, the Commission proposed revising the Single Permit Directive and the Long-Term Residents Directive to establish a more effective framework.

The EU also launched the MSCA4Ukraine scheme as part of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. This initiative supports displaced Ukrainian researchers, enabling them to continue their work in European academic or non-academic organizations and contribute to rebuilding Ukraine’s research and innovation capacity.

The European Humanitarian Response Capacity initiative aims to provide services to humanitarian partners and EU Member States, ensuring a more impactful response to the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine and supporting civilians who did not leave the country.

Furthermore, the EU established the "Supporting Ukraine, neighbouring EU Member States and Moldova" Network for non-governmental organizations, facilitating partnerships and civil society coordination.

With the EU4Health program agreement, Ukraine will benefit from EU health-related funding to support its healthcare sector and contribute to reconstruction efforts. The EU has expressed full and unwavering support for Ukraine, acknowledging the physical and mental suffering caused by the Russian invasion and the pressure it has put on the country’s public health system.

Overall, the EU’s assistance to Ukraine encompasses humanitarian aid, support for researchers, legal pathways to the EU, health cooperation, and civil society coordination, demonstrating a comprehensive approach to address the challenges faced by Ukraine.

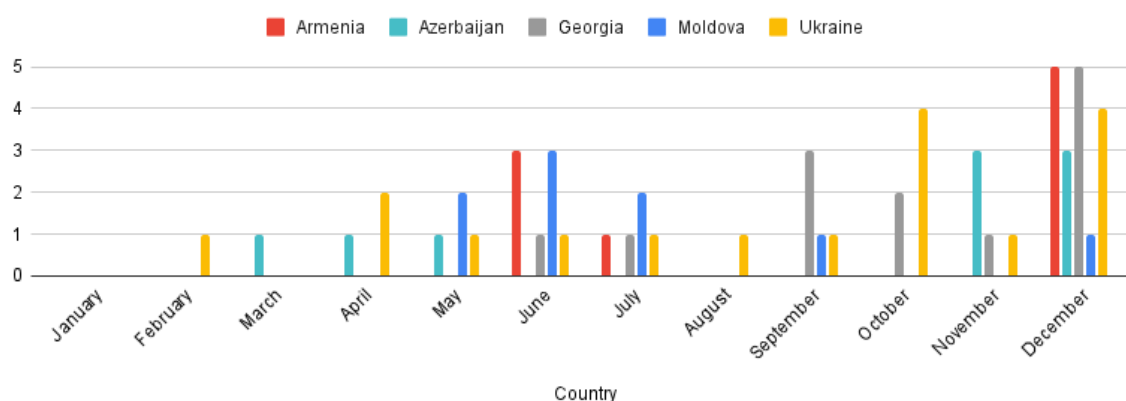
At the same time EU4 Independent Media aims to raise the abundance of quality journalism in the independent media sector from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

The EU’s adjustments aligned with its stated priorities and demonstrated its commitment to supporting Eastern Partnership states in relevant areas. However, while the adjustments were most significant in the case of Ukraine and Georgia, they notably lagged behind in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova.

The invested efforts resulted in a certain progress in the respective countries with the highest results in Ukraine and Georgia and noticeable steps forward in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova.

1.2. Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair and inclusive societies. EaP Countries' Reforms in 2022 (not including roll backs): Dynamics by Months

Data: Civic EaP Tracker project team based on the information from the European institutions' and EaP governments' websites



Ukraine has achieved significant milestones in various areas, as evidenced by recent decrees and resolutions issued by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2022. These milestones highlight the country’s progress in civic education, public control over anti-corruption efforts, and the advancement of e-governance. A significant step was the joining of the Istanbul Convention, which Ukraine ratified on June 20, 2022, bringing Ukrainian approaches to detecting and responding to violence against women and domestic violence closer to modern European

standards; passing the Law on Media and the Law on National Minorities (Communities). The respective parliamentary committee has started work on amendments to the Social Code, primarily concerning veterans, but also in terms of alignment with EU legislation. |

In the field of civic education, Ukraine has taken steps to enhance the development of citizens' competencies and promote values based on national and universal principles. The Cabinet of Ministers has amended the Concept of Development of Civic Education, emphasizing the importance of instilling civic responsibility, respect for rights and freedoms, and active participation in society. This focus aims to strengthen democracy, uphold the rule of law, and raise awareness among citizens that they are the ultimate source of power and sovereignty in Ukraine.

Regarding anti-corruption measures, Ukraine has established the Public Control Council at the National Anti-Corruption Bureau. This council plays a crucial role in ensuring transparency and accountability in the fight against corruption.

In the realm of e-governance, Ukraine has made significant strides in utilizing digital technologies to improve government services and interaction between citizens and authorities. Amendments have been made to the Procedure for the Use of Funds allocated for the "E-Government" program. These changes expand the scope of the program to include the development of online platforms for citizens' engagement and interaction with executive bodies and civil society institutions.

Among the other notable steps achieved by Ukraine there are: changes to the Cabinet of Ministers' resolution regarding youth advisory bodies, ratifying the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, enacting the Law on Public Health to strengthen healthcare systems and improve the quality of life, establishing the Coordination Council for the protection and safety of children, passing the Media Law to protect freedom of expression and ensure diverse and reliable information, adopting the Law on National Minorities to safeguard the rights and cultural identities of minority communities, and proposing a new law on citizen petitions to enhance civic engagement. Additionally, Ukraine has made significant efforts to comply with international humanitarian law, particularly the Geneva Conventions, in ensuring proper treatment of prisoners of war. These achievements highlight Ukraine's commitment to legal reforms, human rights, public health, child protection, media regulation, minority rights, and humanitarian standards. They also signal the country's commitment to democratic values, combating corruption, and harnessing technology for efficient governance.

Georgia has achieved significant milestones in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as advancing human rights and good governance. These accomplishments include adopting the first-ever internal Gender Equality Strategy and Action Plan by the Civil Service Bureau, promoting women's meaningful participation in peace processes through regular dialogue with civil society representatives, and implementing the National Action Plan for the UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security. Legislative amendments have been enacted to enhance access to state services for survivors of violence against women and domestic violence, and the government has introduced compensation for victims/survivors of such violence.

Georgia also made progress, in particular in gender-responsive public financial management and accountability, as well as mainstreaming gender in state policies through thematic inquiries. The establishment of the Thematic Rapporteur on Women, Peace, and Security in the Parliament has facilitated advocacy for internally displaced persons and women in conflict-affected areas. Furthermore, legislative amendments have been initiated to introduce Gender Impact Assessments, contributing to evidence-based policymaking and good governance.

Efforts to promote dialogue and information-sharing between relevant stakeholders, including internally displaced persons, conflict-affected women, and civil society organizations, have been prioritized. There have been discussions on media regulation and amendments to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting to ensure professional media practices. Additionally, initiatives have been undertaken to promote women's participation in elections, and the government has approved a comprehensive 8-year human rights strategy.

These achievements highlight Georgia's relative progress in reaching gender equality, women's empowerment, human rights, good governance, and inclusive decision-making processes.

Armenia, in its turn, enacted the Law on Amendments to legislation "On human reproductive health and reproductive rights". This law aims to protect and promote reproductive health and rights, ensuring access to comprehensive healthcare services in this domain. Additionally, the Law "On transplanting human organs" was passed and enhanced regulations related to organ transplantation and ensuring ethical practices in this area. Another amended Law "On drugs" addressed.

To support social welfare, Armenia improved the Law on "On Social Assistance" This law provides a regulatory framework for housing programs aimed at supporting young families.

In the education sector, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport (MESCS) has taken significant steps to empower youth and provide them with additional educational opportunities. The "Youth Work" program, approved by the orders of the Minister of MESCS offers supplementary education programs for young people, providing a framework for youth engagement and development. Moreover, the guidelines for the involvement of young people in decision-making at the local level were approved.

Azerbaijani experts believe that the decisions of the Azerbaijani government to take into account the annual report of the Commissioner for Human Rights (the ombudsman), and to take into account the annual information provided by the State Committee on Family, Women, and Children's Problems, which oversees gender equality initiatives is also a significant step. Azerbaijan has also made strides in inclusive education, as evidenced by the passage of a Law on the education of persons with disabilities.

In the field of youth policies, often prioritized by the EU the Ministry of Youth and Sports has been actively working with youth organizations and establishing Youth Houses in various regions. These initiatives aim to create opportunities for youth development, leisure activities, and personal growth.

The launch of the "Gender Azerbaijan" portal highlights Azerbaijan's attempts to shape its policies within the gender equality frame. The portal serves as a platform for coordination, efficiency, and transparency in implementing activities related to gender equality. It provides information on legislation, education, institutional mechanisms, and research in the field. Efforts to promote gender equality also extend to the military sector, where seminars on gender equality have been conducted by the Ministry's Office for Women and Families of Servicemen.

In addressing domestic violence, Azerbaijan implemented a National Action Plan and established a Care Call Center to respond to complaints related to domestic violence and children in difficult living conditions.

Moldova also has been actively implementing reforms in the areas of social services, gender equality, youth empowerment, external assistance coordination, labour regulations, cultural heritage, and international cooperation. Moldova has undertaken commitments within the partnerships for Inclusive and Resilient Social Canteen Services. Besides, Moldova ratified the Istanbul Convention, signalling a strong commitment to combating violence against women and promoting gender equality.

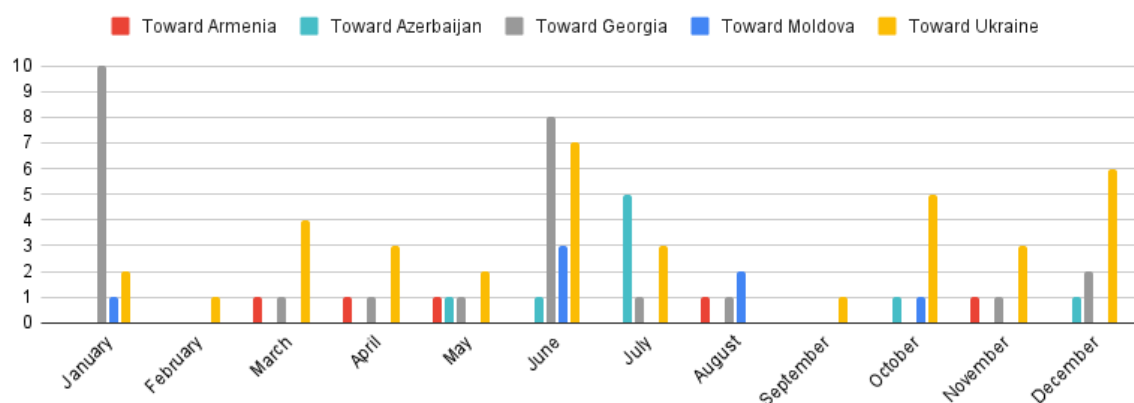
Moreover, like the other EaP countries Moldova adopted several laws to amend normative acts, including labour regulations, equal opportunities between women and men, the status of staff in the cabinet of public officials, non-discrimination, copyright, and the protection of cultural heritage. These amendments aim to enhance legal frameworks and ensure compliance with international standards.

In order to strengthen border security and fosters collaboration with EU institutions Moldova ratified an agreement with the European Union regarding operational activities carried out by the European Border Police and Coast Guard Agency.

The actions taken by national governments and parliaments were closely monitored by European institutions, and the progress, or lack thereof, was duly reflected in their respective conclusions.

1.3. Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair and inclusive societies. EU Actions Toward EaP Countries in 2022: Dynamics by Months

Data: Civic EaP Tracker project team based on the information from the European institutions' and EaP governments' websites



In the case of Armenia, the Partnership Council reiterated the shared commitment of the EU and Armenia to human rights, fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, and democratic principles. The Partnership Council welcomed the progress made in implementing Armenia's national strategy for judicial and legal reforms and its national anti-corruption strategy, while acknowledging that challenges still exist.

The Cooperation Implementation Report on Azerbaijan, prepared by the European Commission, concluded that the implementation of the 2020-2022 national action plan on the promotion of an open government has been slow and has not yet resulted in an improved operating space for civil society organizations or increased public control and participation. The registration process for grants remains lengthy and challenging for most civil society organizations in Azerbaijan, impeding EU support for civil society in the country.

Regarding Georgia, following the EU-Georgia Association Council, the European Council expressed its readiness to grant candidate status once the priorities outlined in the Commission's opinion have been addressed. The EU emphasized the importance of an inclusive process involving representatives from civil society and parliamentary opposition groups. The EU called upon political forces to unite, work together, and prioritize addressing these identified priorities.

In the cases of Ukraine and Moldova, the European Council has made the decision to grant candidate country status to both Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. The Commission has been asked to provide a report to the Council on the progress made in meeting the conditions outlined in the Commission's opinions on their membership applications, which will be included in the regular enlargement package. The Council will make further decisions once all the specified conditions have been fully met. This decision has served as a catalyst for reforms in both countries, including the areas related to building resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies. The final decision of the EU on the progress in these fields remains pending.

Assessment

Summarizing, the progress made by Eastern Partnership in the field of priority “Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies” has been varied, with Ukraine receiving the highest attention from EU officials. The EU has not only issued statements but has also provided support through projects and programs aimed at fostering resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies. These adjustments by the EU align with its stated priorities and demonstrate its commitment to assisting Eastern Partnership states in relevant areas.

The efforts invested in these countries have resulted in noticeable progress, with Ukraine and Georgia leading the way and Moldova making some strides as well. Armenia and Azerbaijan have also shown notable advancements. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are still gaps, with Ukraine and Georgia being at the forefront. Throughout the process, the actions taken by national governments and parliaments have been closely monitored by European institutions, and their progress, or lack thereof, has been duly reflected in the respective conclusions. This highlights the accountability and evaluation mechanisms in place to ensure the effectiveness of the reforms and the alignment with European standards, and stipulates national governments to proceed with the respective reforms.

In 2022, the EU demonstrated its ability to adapt to new challenges and conditions in relations with the countries of the Eastern Partnership. By leveraging this neighborhood instrument and building upon its previous achievements, European institutions focused their efforts on addressing the most pressing risks and problems within states and the region as a whole. This particularly pertains to activities carried out within the framework of the priority "Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies". Consequently, over the past year, the EU has invested significant efforts to help Ukrainian and, to a lesser extent, Moldovan civil society organizations and other non-governmental actors in response to the challenges caused by Russia's full-scale invasion. Simultaneously, within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, the EU during the past year, made a lot of considerable endeavours to ensure long-term positive changes in the domains of civil society, independent media, human rights protection, democracy, gender equality, mobility and health sustainability in accordance with the current needs and capabilities of the respective states of the region to changes. Notably, these initiatives were largely reflected in the policies of the governments of the Eastern Partnership countries.

In the domain of supporting capable and resilient civil societies in 2022, the EU paid special attention to the need to enhance the participation of CSOs in decision-making in Georgia and Moldova. Although this was done as part of the countries' applications to join the bloc, the European institutions continued to utilize tools developed and tested within the framework of the Eastern Partnership to facilitate the relevant changes. It is worth noting that in the case of Georgia, this concentration of efforts was primarily motivated by political polarization in the country and strained relations between the government and a big part of CSOs' ecosystem, and in the case of Moldova, it was motivated by the weakness of the mechanisms for the participation of independent non-governmental actors in decision-making. These problems have not yet been fully resolved in both countries. As for Ukraine, during the past year, the EU did not prioritize specific decisions directly related to civil society. On the one hand, this is due to the quality and quantity of decisions adopted by the state in previous years, which created the best environment for CSOs among all Eastern Partnership countries. On the other hand, the civil society of Ukraine, with Russia's invasion in 2022, faced many numerous new challenges and demonstrated its resilience by actively integrating into the defence of the country, strengthening existing and creating new partnerships with the government. In the case of Armenia, the key decisions to improve the environment for civil society were made in previous years, especially before and immediately after the conclusion of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement. In 2022, the EU noted the country's progress and encouraged the implementation of legal changes in practice. Finally, during the past year, European institutions consistently advocated the need

for increased civil society involvement in decision-making and improvement of the enabling environment for it in Azerbaijan. However, there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of framework legal changes.

It is worth noting that during the past year, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine were active in decisions regarding the involvement of youth in the processes and improving the connections of national youth associations/individual young citizens with EU partners. However, all three countries prioritized not on the adoption of general legal provisions for this, but on implementation steps (establishment of special authorities, creation/strengthening of youth councils, initiation of new programs for youth, etc.).

Also, during the analysed period, the EU, urged all the countries of the Eastern Partnership, without exception, to take concrete steps to improve the environment for independent media and supported the corresponding changes. This was particularly reflected in the accession recommendations for Georgia and Ukraine, statements and conclusions for the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia. In the case of Moldova, it was about supporting the capabilities of independent publications (the country has the best position in freedom of the media according to the World Press Freedom Index 2023 among all analysed countries). As a result, several frameworks and implementation decisions were adopted in Georgia and Ukraine to improve the freedom of the media environment. No notable legal acts or implementation steps in this context were recorded in Armenia and Azerbaijan. At the same time, it is fair to admit that the Armenian media space has the second freedom figures in the region after Moldova according to the World Press Freedom Index 2023. Arguably, this achievement can be attributed to the decisions made in the previous years and the stability of the national independent media.

Ensuring democracy was one of the key issues in the communication of EU representatives with the official Baku and Tbilisi over the last year (it is worth noting that the countries are at different levels on this issue, according to the Freedom in the World report for 2022). In the case of Azerbaijan, the encouragement from European institutions was focused on the framework changes to ensure a pluralistic and competitive environment. In the case of Georgia, it was about overcoming political polarization and the too-weak access of the opposition to influencing the processes in the state. In particular, this issue was highlighted in the accession recommendations of the European Commission for the country. As a result, Georgian state actors have taken several notable decisions in this area, but their implementation remains to be assessed. In other countries of the Eastern Partnership, no significant decisions in this area were recorded (noticeable changes were implemented in previous years).

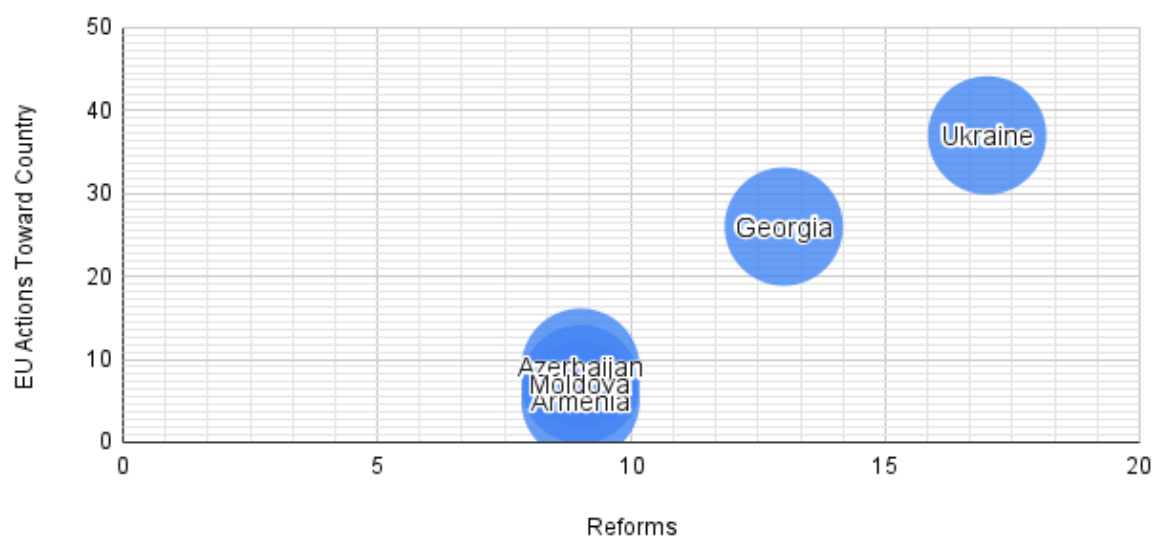
Ensuring human rights, primarily with regards to gender equality, protecting women from violence and combating discrimination, was one of the EU's priorities in communication with all analyzed countries during 2022 – reflected both in statements and in conclusions. These issues were also underscored in the accession recommendations for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Among the notable steps of the states, it is worth noting the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) by the Moldovan and Ukrainian parliaments (Georgia ratified the document earlier). These steps preceded the granting of candidate status to the EU for them. In addition, the state actors of Georgia and Moldova adopted several notable laws, amendments and implementation decisions in the field of gender equality, protection of women, and protection and monitoring of human rights. The quality of these steps has yet to be assessed. The parliament and government of Azerbaijan have also taken a number of notable steps to ensure gender equality in various professional fields. Due to the war, Ukraine faced enormous challenges in monitoring the state of human rights (the situation of people in the temporarily occupied territories and in the war zone, protection of children, and treatment of prisoners of war) and, accordingly, adopted the new frames of the Ombudsman's Secretariat functioning. In addition, the Ukrainian parliament adopted a new framework law on ensuring the rights of citizens belonging to national minorities. It has yet to be assessed by the Venice Commission.

No significant steps advancements have been made on mobility issues, neither by the EU nor by the Eastern Partnership countries, during the analysed period. Only in the case of

Moldova and Ukraine did the European institutions expand the possibilities of cooperation with the respective states in matters of border management under conditions of the refugee influx. In general, in this regard, the countries of the Eastern Partnership continue to cooperate with the EU within the framework of previous formats (for example, within the framework of the visa suspension mechanism for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). In addition, in 2022, the EU continued to support the healthcare sector of the analysed states, in particular in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the case of Ukraine, also in response to the challenges posed by the Russian invasion. At the same time, Armenia and Ukraine adopted several notable laws and implementing decisions to transform the system of public health and medical care.

1.4. Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair and inclusive societies. EU Actions Toward EaP Countries and EaP Countries' Reforms in 2022

Data: Civic EaP Tracker project team based on the information from the European institutions' and EaP



A comparison of the EU's actions towards the countries of the Eastern Partnership and the decisions of the state actors of the countries under the priority "Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies" demonstrates a significant correlation between the EU's encouragement and reforms in the relevant areas in Ukraine and Georgia. First of all, this correlation can be attributed to the impact of the recommendations of the European Commission for these states regarding their path to joining the United Europe. The timeline of EU actions, when compared to the timeline of decisions made within the countries, supports this observation. At the same time, it also demonstrates the impact of the accession recommendations on changes in Moldova, where fewer reforms were recorded, but they were aimed at implementing the requirements of the European Commission. Although Moldovan state actors in 2022 did not fully address the improvement of mechanisms for civil society participation in decision-making, it should be emphasized that the conclusion of the European Commission at the end of 2023 will be of key importance in the assessment of the accession reforms of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Based on the above observations, it can be concluded that the previous national decisions in frames of the Eastern Partnership initiatives have created an effective legal framework in these countries and the EU's support mechanisms for the implementation of relevant changes.

A quantitative analysis of EU actions and reforms in Armenia and Azerbaijan under the priority "Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies" in 2022 reveals that the decisions of made by the Azerbaijani government were more determined by the position and efforts of the EU. However, a qualitative analysis of the relevant changes in the countries rather indicates that the relations between the EU and Armenia in this area are at a more advanced level, where more concrete decisions and initiatives are considered. At the

same time, official Yerevan, according to the EU, still has a lot to do in the field of media freedom, protection of human rights, gender equality, etc. It is worth noting that the evaluations of the European institutions regarding the tasks of the official Baku include an even broader range of spheres and refer to steps of a wider scale, in particular in matters of creating enabling environment for civil society, human rights, democracy and gender equality.

Under these conditions, in the further endeavours with the countries of the Eastern Partnership within the framework of the priority "Together for resilient, gender-equal, fair, and inclusive societies", EU actors should focus on the development of separate tailored strategies for supporting reforms and the communication agenda, according to the situation in each state. At the same time, it remains important to deepen ties and exchange practices in this area between state actors, experts and CSOs from all countries of the region. Finally, the authorities in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine should strengthen their efforts to enhance mechanisms of civil society participation in decision-making/public processes in general and the protection of human rights, particularly in the light of the security challenges in the region.

Special view from Belarusian Civil Society

Reforms were implemented within the priority in Belarus before the suspension of its participation in the EaP & rollbacks of the reforms within the priority in 2022

Some positive changes and improvement in the political climate took place in Belarus between 2014-2020. It was also a result of participation in the Eastern Partnership programs.

During this period, pressure on the civil society and control over the civil activities was significantly reduced, criminal and administrative prosecution of activists practically ceased. Cooperation between civil society organisations and authorities was expanding, in 2016-2019, for the first time since the early 2000s, two deputies associated with civil society and the political opposition were included in the parliament. Some restrictions on obtaining foreign funding were lifted, as well as crowd-funding was allowed. Many public initiatives began to be publicly supported by national business. Almost all of the noted changes did not provide institutional changes, but created conditions for the strengthening and development of the non-governmental organizations sector.

The pressure on non-state and foreign media in Belarus also decreased. Contacts between non-state media and state structures have become regular, and openness of the authorities has increased. An informal ban was lifted on officials giving interviews to non-state media, inviting journalists to official events, and placing commercial advertisements in non-state media. During this period, the non-state sector of Internet media was actively developing, in which the central place was occupied by the tut.by. Non-state media in many respects were equal or superior to the influence of state-run media.

Key initiatives within the domain of civil society and youth participation, independent media and fact-based information, democracy, protection of human rights and promotion of gender equality expressed by the EU in communication with the independent Belarusian civil society in 2022

After the political crisis of 2020, caused by fraudulent elections, the Belarusian authorities resorted to mass repression, which almost completely destroyed the sector of non-governmental organizations, independent media and made oppositional political activity impossible. Since the summer of 2020, about 4,000 have been criminally prosecuted for their political activity, and tens of thousands have been subject to administrative prosecution. There are currently about 1,500 political prisoners in Belarus. Hundreds of civil society organizations were liquidated. Tens of thousands of public and political activists were forced to leave the country. The independent media sector was also almost completely destroyed. All leading media were closed, most of them were recognized as extremists. About 500 journalists were forced to leave the country.

Under these conditions, the main efforts of the EU in communication with the independent Belarusian civil society were aimed at helping to preserve the NGO sector in the country and emigration, helping to support and rehabilitate political prisoners, supporting the preservation and development of the independent media sector outside the country, overcoming the crisis, minimizing the consequences of repressions, preserving the capacity of civil society in Belarus.

Issues that the EU should prioritise in communication/cooperation with the independent Belarusian civil society regarding civil society and youth participation, independent media and fact-based information, democracy, protection of human rights and promotion of gender equality

At present, the structures of civil society, due to repressions and rupture of integrity, are practically deprived of the possibility of crowdfunding, receiving funds from business. Independent media under pressure cannot function as comically successful businesses. Due to the danger of reprisals, there is a large outflow of personnel from NGOs and non-state media in Belarus. In emigration there is also an outflow of personnel to other, more paid areas of employment.

At the same time, the preservation of the NGO and independent sector is important for ensuring the rights of various groups in the country and, obtaining information about events and trends in Belarus, maintaining opportunities for social activity, countering Russian influence and pro-Russian propaganda, creating a positive image of Europe, formulating an alternative to the authoritarian regime in Belarus.

Priorities in communication/cooperation with the independent Belarusian civil society:

Sustainability of the NGO sector and independent media. Cooperation/communication should be aimed at increasing the sustainability of the sector and developing its capacity, through long-term cooperation programs, as well as assistance in diversifying funding. It is necessary to move from the crisis model of support to long-term and medium-term programs of cooperation and capacity development.

Focus on the situation in Belarus. Support should be connected with maintaining influence, information and other presence in Belarus, defending the interests and needs of various groups within Belarus. The same priority includes the creation by the civil society of Belarus of a positive alternative to the existing authorities in Belarus, reform projects, rethinking of the place of Belarus in the region and the world.

Countering Russian influence, anti-European narratives and disinformation. In the context of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, an important priority for cooperation between the EU and Belarusian civil society should be activities aimed at countering Russian informational, cultural and economic influence, as well as countering disinformation. The additional important issue is counteracting propaganda of Belarusian authorities aimed at creating a negative and hostile image of the EU, NATO and other western institutions.

Understanding the situation in Belarus and keeping Belarus on the European agenda. Repressions, emigration, Russia's war against Ukraine, the strengthening of Russian influence lead to the isolation of Belarus. This worsens the understanding of the processes and moods within the country, as well as marginalising Belarus as an independent issue on the European agenda. One of the priorities should be monitoring and researching the situation in Belarus in various areas, as well as maintaining Belarus as an independent issue on the European agenda.

Information. Education. Culture. Due to the fact that political and social activity in Belarus is difficult, the priority should be to work in areas where it is difficult to ensure state control. In particular, the sphere of information, education and national culture and identity.

Resilience of Civil Society and Media In the Eastern Partnership: Drive for Democracy & Inclusiveness

Policy brief

A think tank consortium led by **Ukrainian Prism** with the support of the **Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum** is launching a set of thematic expert debates in Brussels, devoted to five key priorities of the EaP. The project team is involved in the monitoring of the EaP policy implementation in each of the partner states. We look into the performance of each partner country along with the key priorities and invite you to the discussions about the future shape of the region and EU policy towards it.

This is the first policy brief assessing the state of play in each of the five EaP states. A special view from Belarusian civil society is included as a separate opinion on the topic. For this discussion, we invite experts from all participants of the Eastern Partnership policy and decision-makers from European institutions.



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