

Date: July 11, 2024

Hosted by: Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law (KPSRL) and Team Europe Democracy (TED) Initiative

Moderators: Amy Eaglestone (University of Birmingham) and Madina Davletkildeeva (GIZ)

Key takeaways

- With demands for reform during the EU accession process, also comes a responsibility to look further than formal processes, institutions, and regulations. EU support to democracy and rule of law reform has to be people-centred and is only sustainable if taking the voices and needs of the population of Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries as the starting point to improve those more formal institutions and regulations. Applying such a 'civic engagement lens' throughout EU's initiatives is a skill to be acquired and trained.
- EU support still tends to go through/to 'usual suspects'. It is difficult to collaborate with smaller organisations, or those in geographic regions that don't have a historic culture of civil society or regions that are politically less aligned (and therefore less connected) with the EU. This requires investing in new networks, channels, instruments, and platforms. This while being cognizant of the sensitivities when reaching out on themes like justice and human rights, ensuring for example safe spaces or more subtle diplomacy.
- Fostering a 'CSO culture' amongst others means supporting organisations in their revenue search, resilience against shrinking civic space and capacities to mobilise. It also means facilitating their seat at the table during institutional reform processes - and considering this the norm.

Goals& background session

Moderators introduced the session by highlighting its objective to draw conclusions from a learning trajectory focused on civic engagement while supporting democracy and Rule of Law (RoL) reforms, a continuation of discussions from two previous sessions on [Moldova](#) (October 2023) and [Georgia](#) (July 2023) hosted by KPSRL and Amy Eaglestone.

This session specifically aimed to explore avenues for enhanced collaboration between the EU, civil society, and EaP countries without preconceived outcomes, thus fostering a broad exploration and open dialogue on the potential for improved civic engagement during reform support in EaPs.

Agenda

The webinar was structured to include:

- A panel discussion featuring four experts
- A Q&A session
- Breakout sessions for detailed discussions
- A wrap-up session summarising key points and future steps

Panel Composition

- Giulio Venneri - EU (DG NEAR)
- Radica Nusdorfer - EU (DG NEAR)
- Eva Pružincová - Slovakiaid
- Andrei Curărau - WatchDog.md

Discussions

Giulio Venneri

Giulio Venneri provided a thorough evaluation of the situation civil society is facing in EaP countries, addressing both the challenges and opportunities. He outlined that the annual stocktaking exercise scheduled for later in autumn has not yet concluded, but there are already observable dangerous trends such as shrinking civic spaces. This is especially evident in increasingly autocratic countries, with Georgia highlighted as a particularly concerning case due to legislation that penalises active civil society. These conditions have served as a wake-up call for the EU, emphasising the need for enhanced support to empower civil societies to function effectively and make a meaningful impact.

Despite these challenges, Venneri conveyed a sense of opportunity, noting the EU's commitment to not only continue its engagement but also potentially strengthen it, focusing particularly on countries like Moldova and Ukraine. He discussed how a methodology introduced four years ago has improved visibility and structured engagement in democratic processes such as elections and the functioning of parliaments. This approach aims to provide a broader context for enabling environments and to maintain a grip on how civil society functions.

Moreover, the EU Council has adopted a new strategic agenda for the next four years, aiming to foster a free and more democratic Europe. This agenda requires a change in paradigm, advocating for an active defence of democracy, perceived as under threat, and emphasising the importance of democratic resilience, the rule of law, and anti-corruption measures.

It is important to remember that as any external actor, the EU is limited in what it can do. The demand for reforms should come from the EaP countries' citizens. The EU can create an enabling environment to express such demands and support their realisation. Venneri highlighted the example of Albania, where comprehensive and meaningful reforms were initiated due to societal pressure, particularly in anti-corruption efforts. This demonstrates the critical role of organised citizen participation in advancing substantial discussions and reforms, not only in countries slated for EU enlargement but also in those that are not. He stressed the need for a stable and empowering civil society on both sides to drive these reforms forward.

In response to questions about the impact in EaP countries and comparisons with other regions, Venneri emphasised the transformative potential of what he termed a "virtuous partnership" between the EU and civil society. This approach advocates for more dynamic and content-rich reforms based on societal needs and pressures, underscoring the importance of civil society in the broader context of EU engagement and support.

Radica Nusdorfer

Radica Nusdorfer emphasised how defending democratic resilience goes far beyond 'hard security' (military, institutions) and welcomed Team Europe Democracy to strengthen the 'softer' side of democracy and rule of law. Rule of law and human rights are the foundation on which other potential benefits from accession processes – economic opportunities, connectivity – are co-dependent on.

While acknowledging the challenges outlined by Giulio Venneri, Nusdorfer chose to highlight the positive developments and ongoing operational work within the framework of EU's geopolitical strategy, especially amidst the enlargement processes.

She detailed the EU's commitment through DG NEAR's regional projects which aim to reinforce the fundamentals of democracy. These projects bring heightened scrutiny to countries within the region and highlight the potential for positive democratic changes to influence neighbouring areas, explicitly mentioning Armenia. Again, such democratic foundations start with the rule of law, and without this foundation, other reform areas could be significantly limited in their impact on the broader population.

There are many ongoing initiatives from the EU's side. This is partially institutional (e.g. parliament, justice sector), supporting the transparency, inclusiveness and effectiveness of those institutions. However, the EU also facilitates citizen-state dialogue platforms, helps civil society in its capacity to monitor (e.g. through dashboards on quality of justice) and supports independent media. Nusdorfer highlighted several key initiatives:

- The first-time collaboration with OSCE ODHIR focusing on creating inclusive, accountable, transparent, and RoL-compliant institutions. This project aims to improve the transparency and inclusiveness of governmental institutions, involving civil society in the oversight of parliamentary processes and the accuracy of electoral processes.
- The "PRO elect" project, designed to promote accountability in the electoral process throughout the EaP countries, focusing on empowering civil society to monitor the entire electoral cycle. This initiative also includes financial support for civil society organisations participating in election observation missions, with a particular focus on Moldova and Georgia.
- Cooperation with the European Endowment of Democracy to address the shrinking civic space through support for media and human rights defenders.

Nusdorfer also discussed the substantial financial commitment to civil society from the EU, with total support amounting to 270 million EUR since 2020, aimed at various bilateral, thematic, and regional projects. This funding has supported civil society's participation in the political process, strengthened monitoring and advocacy, and enhanced the watchdog capabilities of these organizations.

Finally, she touched upon the EU's responsiveness to immediate needs, as demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ongoing efforts to bridge the gap between civil society and government sectors through initiatives focused on gender equality and anti-corruption. These efforts underline the EU's desire to further enhance its cooperation and support, contingent upon the availability of financial resources. Nusdorfer concluded by expressing a forward-looking perspective, inviting opinions on how to deepen this collaborative effort.

Eva Pružincová

Slovakaid has supported local Moldovan media outlets by enhancing their capacities, fostering sustainable revenue streams to strengthen independence, and promoting professional, fact-based reporting that includes resilience against fake news. These efforts were achieved through a combination of grants, training sessions, study visits to Slovakia, and mentorship models. Applying the session's focus on civic engagement could expand such initiatives to consider which voices are represented in the media and which audiences are reached. For more details, please refer to the attached presentation by the speaker.

Andrei Curărau

Andrei Curărau from the Moldovan Watchdog.md sees political momentum for democratic change in Moldova, but highlighted the significant challenges faced by civil society, primarily due to disinformation and foreign political agendas. He stressed the urgent need to build local media capacities to counteract the growing influence of disinformation, which is being used to promote interests foreign to Moldova. The government has acknowledged the severity of this threat, one it finds too vast to handle alone.

Andrei detailed the influence of pro-Russian political forces in shaping a segment of Moldovan civil society. These forces have been active in organising events and initiatives like the 9th May Parades and programs to prepare tens of thousands of Youth Ambassadors for Eurasian values, which significantly tilt public perception and civil activities towards Russian interests. He also mentioned that there are legislative efforts to fund NGOs that might not align Moldova closer to EU standards but instead keep it tethered to Russian influences.

Discussing financial challenges, the speaker noted that Moldovan NGOs are facing dwindling funding opportunities, making European support crucial for their survival and effectiveness. Despite a challenging environment under previous administrations that were not aligned with Moldovan constitutional principles, there have been recent improvements in government relations with civil society, particularly in capacity-building initiatives like those combating disinformation.

Curărau responded to Amy's query about advising the EU by suggesting three main strategies to enhance civil society's role in Moldova:

1. The EU should treat civil society organisations as partners and include them in negotiation processes of EU accession, taking advantage of current opportunities like the screening processes for EU integration.
2. There should be a simplification in accessing funds for NGOs, especially at the grassroots level, where organisational structures may be nascent or underdeveloped. The EU can also support by fostering that culture to organise in such bodies, as this is not the tradition in all parts of Moldova.
3. Local NGOs should have greater representation in official reporting and decision-making processes to ensure that the government recognizes and integrates the perspectives of civil society, thus enhancing their influence and safeguarding their interests in the long-term integration process.

These recommendations aim to strengthen the role and voice of civil society in Moldova, pushing back against external influences and fostering a more enabling democratic environment aligned with European principles.

Q&A

During the Q&A session of the Eastern Partnership webinar, panellists addressed specific concerns about integrating civil society into broader sectoral programs and the role of EU support in navigating issues like disinformation and government relations.

Question 1: Integrating Civil Society into Broader Sectoral Programs

A Gender Coordinator inquired about integrating civil society into broader portfolios like climate change, beyond small funding lines, and negotiating with the EU for a more systematic approach. Radica responded, emphasising ongoing efforts to prioritise spending on civil society in areas like climate change, security, and energy. However, she acknowledged that a significant portion of funds is currently directed towards core issues such as human rights and basic survival. Linking their voices to global fora is therefore usually too big of an ambition, which means the international community misses out on voices and needs of Moldovan citizens while facilitating these reform processes. This is concerning, as we already described as crucial for sustainable results. A key role for the EU is to echo and strengthen what CSOs express.

Radica highlighted the "EU for dialogue" programme, which builds confidence in conflict areas and has established platforms focused on climate change. She mentioned their plans to engage in discussions at COP 29 and expressed a desire to see civil society move beyond survival to engage in global issues more actively.

Question 2: Disinformation Challenges in Specific Regions

A policy advisor asked Andrei to elaborate on his research concerning disinformation in a specific region. Andrei detailed the organisation of public talks addressing anti-corruption and the criminal connections of local governments. He described how funding from Russia influences local media narratives, creating challenges such as social media threats. This environment complicates civil society's efforts to operate freely and requires capacity building to counteract misinformation effectively.

Giulio Venneri's Additional Comments on EU's Role

Giulio added to the discussion by highlighting the EU's responsibility in fostering healthy relationships with civil society and ministries, which are crucial for a bottom-up process of policy implementation. He highlighted the importance of civil society's role in this triangle, advocating for increased awareness of civil society's contributions and pushing for governments to be more receptive to these roles. Giulio underscored the ongoing silent diplomacy efforts by EU delegations to maintain a balance and ensure that civil society's voice is heard and integrated into the policy cycle.

During the breakout sessions, the discussion focused on the role of NGOs and the EU's contributions, addressing the gaps and challenges in civil society engagement and suggesting pathways for improvement.

Breakout Sessions: Key Feedback

1. General Observations:

- Participants noted that while there was significant discussion about the activities of NGOs and the support they receive from the EU, there was a lack of clarity on the specific issues these NGOs are addressing. There was a call for more explicit communication about the problems being tackled, the goals being pursued, and the outcomes of these efforts.

2. Specific Insights and Suggestions:

- One participant emphasised the need to reach beyond the "usual suspects" in civil society, suggesting that many organisations are overlooked. It is difficult for the EU to collaborate with smaller organisations, or with those in geographic regions that don't have a historic culture of civil society, or regions that are politically less aligned (and therefore less connected) with the EU. The participant pointed out the importance of engaging with the government to improve dialogue with those different societal segments.
- Reaching those different audiences is also a factor to fight disinformation, as the groundwork for susceptibility to disinformation is also laid in daily life through the (humanising) interactions we have and the diversity of ideas we're exposed to.
- Another highlighted the critical issue of funding, especially the need for financial sustainability for grassroots organisations that often go unnoticed. The importance of core funding was stressed as essential for the continuity of these organisations.
- A further point raised involved the interaction with EU stakeholders, where it was noted that while there is a willingness to cooperate, there often remains a significant gap in making impactful decisions. The EU was described as a "black box" by some, with smaller organisations struggling to influence or break into significant roles within the policy-making process. The need for the EU to better echo and channel the voices of civil society was stressed.
- It's not just the EaP countries that are struggling with a legitimacy crisis in governance and eroding social cohesion. The EU Member States have their own serious challenges to democracy and rule of law. This again strengthens the case for homebrew, bottom-up initiatives: the EU does not have all the answers to democratic reform, nor the recipe to achieve it.
- A group discussion led to identifying five key areas for improvement:
 1. Implementation of evidence-based policy-making.
 2. Achieving a coordinated communication approach to avoid contradictory messages and align civil society voices, especially in light of hybrid threats.
 3. Diversifying the beneficiaries of civil society efforts, not just focusing on media but also engaging other sectors and adopting an interdisciplinary approach.
 4. Including youth more actively in civil society initiatives to ensure a broader societal impact and engagement.
 5. Emphasising the need for civil society to have a unified voice to effectively address and influence policy changes.

Concluding Questions and Remarks

During the concluding part of the Eastern Partnership webinar, participants raised several insightful questions and remarks that reflected their diverse interests and backgrounds, focusing on how different sectors could better integrate and enhance civil society contributions.

1. **Higher Academia's Contribution:** A participant from the Netherlands expressed interest in understanding how higher academia could contribute to the initiative. They inquired about follow-up contacts and collaboration opportunities, highlighting the role of academic institutions in supporting civil society initiatives through research and development.
2. **Community Policing and Post-Conflict Reform:** Another participant highlighted the challenges of integrating civil society into community policing, especially in post-conflict reform settings. They noted the general lack of confidence in police when it comes to partnerships with civil society, particularly in comparison to sectors like agriculture. They emphasised the need for enhanced communication between the police and civil society at the country level, questioning which organisations could be trusted and how to manage these relationships more effectively.
3. **Synergies and Coordination:** A participant discussed the importance of synergies and coordination between regional programs in the Eastern Partnership and bilateral interventions at the country level. They stressed the need for close coordination to enhance the effectiveness of these initiatives and ensure that they are complementary.
4. **Comparative Insights from Africa:** A participant from an African NGO that serves as a hub for local organisations and data - which in turn feeds into early warning systems for the international community - reflected on similarities between the Eastern Partnership region and African contexts. He shared insights into the challenges of securitisation of development and the need for data-based programming. They highlighted how civil society is often polarised by funding from different actors and the crucial role of informing government policies and practices through civil society activities.