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From Apathy to Action: Attitudes to Civic Engagement in the Eastern Partnership

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Summary

In the first years of transition after the collapse of the Soviet Union, civil society in the six EaP countries developed similarly. From the second half of the 1990s, they experienced different political trajectories, and so did their respective civil societies in ways strongly influenced by the nature of each political regime.

Georgia and Ukraine developed hybrid regimes with a relatively pluralistic and competitive political environment, in a process punctuated by instances of mass mobilization against autocratizing tendencies. In Armenia, political power was centralized in the hands of a ruling elite that was never fully authoritarian but maintained control over key political and economic resources until 2018. Moldova has maintained a relatively pluralistic political system with free and fair elections and quite free media. However, it has also all the worst features of the post-communist model, including corruption, absence of rule of law, oligarchic clans, poverty, high unemployment and huge emigration. Azerbaijan remains a rich authoritarian state, ruled by the Aliyev dynasty. Belarus has had since 1994 a highly personalistic authoritarian regime that has pursued policies quite different from those in other post-Soviet states.

The number of CSOs has grown considerably in all the EaP countries over the last decade. However, civil society remains weak if measured by the level of membership in these. The EaP countries continue to be affected by considerable civic apathy and disengagement, despite recurrent protests and moments of mass mobilization, especially around elections. Between such moments, though, civic apathy remains prevalent because most citizens do not believe that their engagement in civil society is likely to change anything. Across the EaP countries, there is a mixed picture when it comes to citizens' opinion of and trust in civil society. Recent polls show that, to varying degrees, they hold more positive views of CSOs than some narratives suggest. At the same time, trust in CSOs appears to be lower—sometimes significantly so.

The disconnect between CSOs and societies is greatest when it comes to people's passive, if not outright negative, attitudes toward political activism and issues. The civic apathy and distrust in institutions in the EaP countries increases citizens' susceptibility to conspiracy theories and vulnerability to propaganda and disinformation.

"Post-Sovietness" is often invoked to explain the state of civil society in the EaP countries, but the latter is more the product of their trajectories over the past thirty years. Three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the generational change in which many observers of Eastern European civil society placed their hopes has mostly taken place.

There are key trends in the development of civil society that the EaP countries share despite the differences in their political and economic evolution over the past thirty years. Perhaps the most fundamental problem for the development of a more vibrant civil society—and for the efforts of donors such as the EU and the United States that try to encourage this—is an enduring societal vicious circle. Low sense of agency and low interest in, and dislike of, politics on the part of citizens combine to breed civic apathy. This in turn entrenches low levels of civic engagement.

The underlying dynamics affecting attitudes to civil society and the way they manifest themselves pose tremendous challenges not only to domestic civic actors in their operations and in their attempts to change people's behavior but even more so to donors that support them. Bearing this in mind, there are nonetheless measures that can help societal attitudes change toward active citizenship and thus a healthier civil society. This paper concludes therefore with three sets of recommendations through which donors can help make civic engagement more attractive, reduce mistrust of CSOs, and reducing civic actors' vulnerabilities.

Introduction

The six countries of the European Union's Eastern Partnership (EaP)—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—have to different degrees experienced tremendous political and social change since they became independent after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Over the years, donors such as the United States, the EU, and international financial institutions have invested large amounts of money and efforts to support their transformation into democratic polities. However, the closing of civic space remains a common challenge for these countries—in some cases a more extreme one. The mix of legal restrictions, administrative harassment, and political targeting of civic actors varies but affects civil society even in those EaP countries that have a more pluralistic political environment.

Closing-space measures inflict more damage if they latch onto existing societal biases either vis-à-vis civic activism or the issues activists work on. It is therefore important to be aware of how deep societal dynamics in these countries affect the situation for civic actors. Across the EaP countries, civic apathy and disengagement means citizens are less likely to empathize with beleaguered civic activists. Widespread trust deficits mean citizens are reticent to mobilize in support of those they do not know personally. The greater the gap between civil society organizations (CSOs) and local communities, the likelier it is that the closing-space problem does not resonate with the public, making it harder to overcome. Distrust in societies also creates a breeding ground for fake news, conspiracy theories about “foreign agents,” and demonizing narratives, which render more subtle forms of closing space particularly harmful, not only for the CSOs in question but for the overall health of the democratic public sphere. The securitization of public sphere in countries affected by territorial conflicts provides additional tools for delegitimizing civic activists and suppressing dissent.

The coronavirus crisis has added another possible driver of backsliding. One study found that, Georgia excepted, the EaP countries have experience some

violations of democratic standards since the pandemic's onset.¹ The public-health crisis has also exposed and amplified multiple state failures, though, and weakened the standing of ruling elites. Against this background, elections continue to present possible moments of citizen mobilization, as the situation in Belarus shows. Forthcoming parliamentary elections in Georgia and local elections in Ukraine could lead to popular contestation. Yet, greater civic engagement and productive linkages between the state and civil society are needed for this to translate into long-term progress.

This paper addresses these issues that are of deep relevance not only for citizens of the EaP countries but also for the wide donor and assistance-implementer community that has been active there for decades and still encounter obstacles to the effectiveness of their assistance to developing civil society. The first section traces the evolution of civil society in each of the EaP countries since independence. The second section looks into the strength of civil society and its connection to the public. The third section then reviews new trends in post-Soviet civic spaces and their impact on societal attitudes toward civil society. The paper concludes by drawing together the key lessons about these attitudes and their impact on the development of civil society in the EaP countries. Based on this, it suggests measures that can help societal attitudes change toward active citizenship and thus a healthier civil society.

Civil Society since Independence

In the first years of transition after the collapse of the Soviet Union, civil society developed similarly in the six Eastern Partnership countries. They experienced an unprecedented boom in different forms of civic organizing. Several social movements that had emerged in the late 1980s continued in various forms. These included environmental movements (for example,

1 Amanda B. Edgell et al, *An Update on Pandemic Backsliding: Democracy Four Months After the Beginning of the Covid-19 Pandemic*, V-Dem Project, June 2020.

the Chernobyl movement in Ukraine and Belarus), humanitarian grassroots initiatives (for example, in Armenia in the wake of Spitak earthquake), and women's movements (for example, the Organization of the Soldiers' Mothers of Ukraine). Plenty of small grassroots initiatives emerged, such as cultural clubs, art projects, and publishing projects that disseminated literature that had been banned. In the early 1990s in Azerbaijan, some religious communities (often sponsored from abroad) were active in providing charity and welfare services.

There was an exponential, largely donor-driven, growth in the number of non-governmental organizations.

Finally, there was an exponential, largely donor-driven, growth in the number of non-governmental organizations. Some scholars referred to this phenomenon as the “NGO-ization” of civil society.² In Armenia it was estimated that there were only 44 local NGOs operating in Yerevan in 1994 and that by 1997 over 2,000 were registered.³ In Belarus the number of registered NGOs increased from 24 in 1990 to almost 1,000 by the end of 1995.⁴ In Ukraine, the number of registered NGOs went from 319 in 1991 to more than 17,000 by 1998.⁵ Only a few of these NGOs evolved into “real” rather than “briefcase” organizations,

however. Thus by 1995, the civic landscape in all six countries looked similar. A common Soviet legacy, similar transition paths, and similar types of intervention by Western donors had determined the evolution of their civil societies. Then, from the second half of the 1990s, they experienced different political trajectories, and so did their respective civil societies in ways strongly influenced by the nature of each political regime.

Georgia and Ukraine

Georgia and Ukraine developed hybrid regimes with relatively pluralistic and competitive political environments, in a process punctuated by mass mobilizations against autocratizing tendencies. Their “color” revolutions helped reverse rigged elections and bring the opposition to power. They also created new opportunities for civic actors and kept civic space relatively open. However, these opportunities were not always seized, which led to the disillusionment or anger of citizens.

In Georgia many civil society activists who engaged in the 2003 Rose Revolution went into government. In Ukraine CSOs were important facilitators of the 2004 Orange Revolution but they were not the driving force and they demobilized once opposition parties were in power. Since 2003, CSOs in Georgia have been varied and operated quite freely. Protests in 2019 brought new civic actors into the spotlight and inspired more unity between different ones. At the same time, several organizations are considered to be too close to the main political parties to be independent and can be labelled as GONGOs.

In Ukraine, CSOs remained on the sidelines after the Orange Revolution and President Viktor Yanukovich repressed them after being elected in 2010. At the same time, negotiations with the EU on an Association Agreement created a small opening for the CSOs specializing in related policy advocacy. Before the Euromaidan revolution in 2013-2014 the protest mood was relatively high over corruption and lack of rule of law but no new big civic platforms or networks had emerged. Euromaidan was different from the Rose

2 Sarah L. Henderson, *Building Democracy in Contemporary Russia: Western Support for Grassroots Organizations*, Cornell University Press, 2003; Armine Ishkhanian, *Democracy Building and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Armenia*, Routledge, 2008; Kateryna Pishchikova, *Promoting Democracy in Postcommunist Ukraine: The Contradictory Outcomes of Us Aid to Women's NGOs*, FirstForumPress/Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011.

3 Armine Ishkhanian, *Is the Personal Political? The Development of Armenia's NGO Sector During the Post-Soviet Period*, University of California, Berkeley, 2003

4 T.A. Kuzmenkova, [“Republican and international public associations \(1990-1994\).”](#) NGO.by September 22, 2004; E.P. Gross, [“Institutionalization of the non-governmental organizations in the Republic of Belarus \(1991-2010\).”](#) Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, 2015.

5 Kateryna Pishchikova, *Promoting Democracy in Postcommunist Ukraine*.

and Orange revolutions. It was not an electoral revolution but a protest movement for EU integration and against the corrupt regime. It was civic-driven, with opposition parties jumping on the bandwagon. The harsh attempted repression inspired civic organizing and volunteering for concrete needs of protesters. Importantly, civic actors did not demobilize after Yanukovich's fall. New partnerships and platforms between state and civil society were created. Some activists entered politics or increased their engagement with the reform process, but few became professional politicians.

Georgia and Ukraine show that in regimes with a degree of pluralism and competitiveness, civic spaces are most diverse and linkages between civil society and politics are easy to establish. However, in the absence or stalling of structural reform and sustainable democratization, both countries remain fragile. Civic apathy may return due to the disillusionment with having tried and failed as well to the belief that elite turnover—even through democratic means—does not lead to substantial change. Seeing civic activists sidelined after the effort and sacrifice during mass mobilization can be a sobering experience even for the most active part of the society.

Armenia

In Armenia, power was centralized in the hands of an elite that was never fully authoritarian but maintained control over key political and economic resources until 2018. Civic space was curtailed and the independence of the judiciary undermined, but civic organizing was not banned so many initiatives flourished. In 2008, mass protests were violently repressed. The youth political movement Hima was formed immediately after and organized numerous creative campaigns, concerts, and actions, mainly in Yerevan but also in the regions. Other protest groups mobilized between 2008 and 2011. Some were formed online, such as the Hatuk Gund created via the Odnoklassniki platform. Wives of political prisoners established an organization to advocate for the release of their husbands and demanded fair trials. After a general amnesty in 2011,

many civic initiatives flourished as the government was not openly repressive, especially if the initiatives were not openly political. The 2011-2017 period was fertile for civic actions, such as the Mashtots Park Movement and most importantly Electric Yerevan.

By 2018, society's mobilization potential was high and good networks of civic activists were in place. The revolution ushered in a real regime change and several reforms. It also brought many civic activists into government; for example, some Hima members joined Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's core team and as of now serve in key political positions. Many were also elected to parliament. At the same time, many CSOs continue to cooperate with the "old" political elite: they may look like independent organizations but are often the "civic" arms of political actors. Some civic actors call them GONGOs to emphasize their partisanship, although it is more correct to refer to them as political associations that often present themselves as neutral and independent CSOs.

While the implications of the 2018 revolution are still difficult to gauge, it is clear that the civic initiatives that flourished in the past decade helped shape its course. Among the six EaP countries, this seems to be the sole example of civic initiatives not only forming the backbone of mass protests but also political reform in their wake.

Moldova

Moldova has maintained a relatively pluralistic political system with free and fair elections and quite free media. However, it has also all the worst features of the post-communist model: corruption, absence of rule of law, oligarchic clans, poverty, high unemployment and huge emigration. The policy of approximation with the EU, launched in 2005, was more the result of geopolitical considerations (especially tensions with Russia over the Transnistria conflict) by the Communist Party and subsequently by pro-EU elites than of a commitment to reform. The short-lived protests of 2009 (the Twitter revolution) never grew into countrywide mass mobilization, did not lead to political change, and were violently suppressed. President

Vladimir Voronin relinquished power to a pro-European coalition months later, but as a result of inter-elite bargaining, not citizen pressure. This experience was an important demobilizing factor for civil society.

The coalition that came to power was initially praised for its reforms and commitment to complete approximation with the EU, with which an Association Agreement was signed in 2014. But that same year the revelation of a huge money-laundering scheme provoked crises and protests, while disillusionment set in even among younger activists who had put their hopes into greater approximation with the EU.

The general mood since has been that changes in government do not transform the underlying, informal political structures and the corrupt politics they sustain. In 2019 a reformist government with civil society members in key positions only lasted a few months. Thus, after failing to produce bottom-up change in 2009, civil society was defeated in its attempts to steer top-down reform ten years later. There is evidence of active civic initiatives but also of apathy and disillusionment. The latter may be especially acute currently following the fall of the short-lived reformist government, but this is nonetheless in line with a longer trend of civic disillusionment and sense of helplessness.

Azerbaijan

Since 1993 Azerbaijan has been ruled by the Aliyev dynasty. CSOs are largely coopted by the authoritarian regime, civic space is closely monitored, and the public is largely disengaged. The regime's legitimacy rests on security and welfare provision, with high oil and gas revenues supporting social spending. There is no major socioeconomic frustration in society and overall a preference for stability over the risks associated with political change. This latter logic is reinforced by the official discourse on the unresolved conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, which the regime uses to position itself as the guarantor of security and territorial integrity.

CSOs and opposition groups focusing on political issues are persecuted, and the country has had no

experience with significant mass mobilization over the past 15 years at the national or local level. Over the years, the regime has coopted and supplanted independent civic activism. Since 2007 the state supports and controls the sector through the Council on State Support to NGOs. Charity activities are monopolized by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation. Religious organizations are stigmatized, partly due to fear of extremism and radicalization, but also to avoid the emergence of alternative figures with public authority.

The regime adopted a more repressive stance around the 2013 presidential election, arresting civic activists and implementing strict closing-space measures. It became near impossible for CSOs to promote an agenda that seemed even vaguely political. As a result, several activists moved abroad. The remaining civil society became depoliticized. Several foreign donors downsized their programs or pulled out of the country.

Ironically, the harshness of government's actions in 2013-2016 pushed civil society to "informalize" its operations and to become more sustainable. Repression encouraged more fluid forms of civic action and provided stimulus for domestic fundraising, such as via crowdfunding. Civic activists, including those abroad, use social media to maintain visibility and influence public opinion in the country. Independent blogging has emerged as a new political tool that is often coopted by different factions.

Belarus

Belarus has had since 1994 a highly personalistic authoritarian regime that has pursued policies quite different from those in other post-Soviet states. President Alexander Lukashenka has dominated the country's social, economic, and political development, and his views on civil society are in great continuity with the Soviet era. He has based his legitimacy on his image as a guarantor of equitable socioeconomic development and a bulwark against corruption and unlawful enrichment (Belarus is the only post-Soviet country without strong oligarchic structures.) For older generations Lukashenka has also been seen as

a guarantor of continuity—in a positive sense—with the Soviet regime. Belarus is also the only EaP country without territorial-integrity issues. At the same time, its economic and security dependence on Russia is the strongest in the region. Especially after the 2014 events in Ukraine, this became a restraining or self-censorship factor even for Lukashenka's opponents, due to fears of Russia exploiting political instability.

CSOs with an openly political agenda continued their activities throughout the 1990s and mobilized around opposition candidates in the 2001 and 2006 presidential elections, but these activities were much diminished since due to repression. Many of CSOs now operate from abroad. Tight political control of the public sphere inspired more small-scale grassroots initiatives, however. Independent civic organizing was mostly common via cultural and national heritage projects, grassroots language schools, and IT initiatives. Such grassroots initiatives boomed with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. In the face of the regime's denial of the health crisis, civil society stepped in with fundraising, distribution of equipment, and mutual help initiatives.

Prior to this year's post-election protests, GONGOS were mass-membership bodies and quite active, such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union that supported Lukashenka and organized activities similar to those in Soviet times. Organizations like these were perceived by society as a "civic" arm of the state. As the protests broke out, however, the regime was not able to draw on these structures in order to deploy its supporters.

The Strength of Civil Society and its Connection to the Public

The number of CSOs has grown considerably in all the Eastern Partnership countries over the last decade. A 2019 study lists the number of registered CSOs in the six countries, ranging from 3,114 in Belarus to over 100,000 in Ukraine. (See Table 1) It also shows a wide discrepancy in terms of CSOs per capita, with Belarus and Azerbaijan having 3 and 4 CSOs per 10,000 inhabitants but Georgia having the most with 64.

The civic sector's growth can be broadly illustrated based on USAID's Civil Society Sustainability Index reports from 2010 and 2018. From these, based mostly on official registration data, Armenia had 4,400 civic bodies in 2010 and 5,500 in 2018; Azerbaijan had 2,400 NGOs/CSOs in 2010 and 4,300 in 2018; Belarus had 2,400 civic bodies in 2010 and 3,100 in 2018; Georgia 14,000 non-profits, including 10,000 NGOs/CSOs in 2010 and 27,000 registered in 2018; Moldova had 8,000 NGOs/CSOs in 2010 and 11,600 in 2018; and Ukraine 63,000 associations and charitable organizations in 2010 and about 160,000 broadly defined civic bodies in 2018 (including public associations, trade unions, and religious and charitable organizations).

The number of registered organizations does not reflect the size of the civic sector perfectly, however. There are considerable obstacles to counting the number of organizations, initiatives, or groups that make up the sector, not least under authoritarian or hybrid regimes. There are many unregistered or informal groups and initiatives across the EaP countries. For example, according to USAID's reports, there were an estimated approximately 1,000 NGOs operating unregistered in Azerbaijan in 2010 and still several hundred in 2018.

There is also the equally important issue of registered but inactive organizations. USAID cites one study that concluded that 4,671 CSOs were active in Moldova in 2017 (compared to the 11,600 registered in 2018). USAID also reports that in Ukraine it was estimated 4,000–5,000 registered CSOs could be considered active out of 47,000 and that 10 percent of registered ones did not operate at all in 2007, as well as that 40 percent submitted tax and financial reports in 2015, a likely indicator of activity.

While the number of CSOs has grown, civil society remains weak in the EaP countries if measured by the level of membership in these. In the early 1990s all six had low such levels and the picture has not changed much. There are large-membership bodies, like trade unions or youth organizations, but for the most part these are controlled by elites or are benefit-distributing services (for example, veterans' associations). As

Table 1. Number of Registered CSOs in the Eastern Partnership Countries, 2019.

Country	No. of registered CSOs	Population in millions	CSOs per 10,000 inhabitants
Armenia	5,508	2.95	19
Azerbaijan	4,350	9.94	4
Belarus	3,114	9.49	3
Georgia	24,042	3.73	64
Moldova	9,388	3.55	27
Ukraine	around 100,000	44.62	22

Source: European Center for Not-for-Profit Law and partners, CSO Meter: Assessing the Civil Society Environment in the Eastern Partnership Countries, Regional Report, 2019.

such, they are not a good indicator of the strength of civil society. Many of the CSOs created since the 1990s are not membership-based. According to the World Values Survey, between 95 and 99 percent of respondent in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Ukraine (in 2011) and Georgia (in 2014) said they were not a member of any environmental, professional, charitable, humanitarian, or self-help/mutual aid organization. In Ukraine, while the number of CSOs has grown considerably, membership levels remain extremely low. According to one survey in 2019, 90 percent of respondents said they were not members of any CSO, association, or political party, while 8 percent said they were active in civic life.⁶ In Belarus, in one 2019 study, 20 percent of respondents said they had participated in activities of CSOs and civic initiatives in the past year.⁷ In another survey 3 percent said they took part in

NGO activities in 2019, but 10 percent in self-organized civic action.⁸ There can also be considerable discrepancies between declared membership numbers and the number of poll respondents who say they “belong to a CSO” or “interacted with” or “participated in activities of” CSOs, which may imply they see themselves as “members” or “volunteers” of some kind even if in a formal sense they are not. Polls also offer contradictory data on “participation in CSOs activities” partly because people may not always be aware that they have attended or participated in CSO-organized events, or else because they recognize engagement with individual activists rather than their organizations. Overall, the situation with regard to CSO membership raises questions as to whether citizens in the EaP countries are largely passive or are civically active through other channels.

The EaP countries continue to be affected by considerable civic apathy and disengagement. Occasional mass protests (or even revolutions) show the

6 Democratic Initiatives Foundation, [Civil society in Ukraine: a view from the citizens](#), 7 October 2019.

7 e-baltic.org and Office for European Expertise and Communications, [Civil Society Organizations and Civic Initiatives in Belarus: Potential for Engagement](#), 2019.

8 Pact World, [Belarus National Opinion Poll: Public Opinion Does not Change](#), 2019.

mobilization potential in their societies, but do not necessarily indicate sustained civic activism. Without the latter, these critical events are more likely to fizzle out without generating much substantive change. Moments of mass mobilization have inspired “civic optimism” that tended to be relatively short-lived and led to minor changes in societal attitudes. However, the picture in the six countries in terms of involvement with CSOs has evolved over time and there are differences among them.

One indication of the evolution of citizen engagement is found in the Varieties of Democracy project’s country ratings for whether “There are many diverse CSOs and it is considered normal for people to be at least occasionally active in at least one of them.” (See Figure 1.) In this, the six countries’ ratings started with broadly similar ratings at independence in 1991 but Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine gradually performed better (and Moldova to a lesser degree and later). The ratings for Azerbaijan and Belarus stagnated, before deteriorated for the former after 2008 but started improving for the latter since 2014.

Based on different sources, the USAID Civil Society Sustainability Index report for 2018 notes low levels of engagement with CSOs on different indicators—from 4 percent of people being members of any formal association in Georgia, to 69 percent not participating in any civic engagement in Ukraine. A 2018 survey in Ukraine has 5 percent saying they participated in CSO activities and 7-8 percent saying they actively engaged in community life,⁹ and in another in 2019 8 percent said they were active in civic life.¹⁰

According to one study in Belarus in 2019, 20 percent of respondents said they had participated in activities of CSOs and civic initiatives in past year.¹¹ Another survey for the same years has 3 percent of

Belarusians saying they took part in NGO activities and 10 percent in self-organized civic action.¹² Here too, the discrepancy in answers in individual countries for the same period is likely explained by differences in how respondents interpret the questions and the terms used for civic actors or actions.

Moments of mass mobilization have inspired “civic optimism” that tended to be relatively short-lived and led to minor changes in societal attitudes.

Data from the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) project align with these findings.¹³ On civic engagement, indicating participation in initiatives, Armenia scored 2.2 (in 2019), Moldova 0.7, and Ukraine 0.6 (both in 2018) on a scale from 0 to 10. On active citizenship, indicating more general willingness toward activism, Armenia scored 4.1, Moldova 5.8, and Ukraine 3.9.

According to the World Giving Index, the EaP countries were among those with the lowest level of people donating to charities and volunteering their time over the last decade.¹⁴ Over 2009-2019, the percentage of people donating to charity in the EaP countries ranged from 20 percent in Moldova to 6 percent in Georgia, and that for volunteering time from 25 percent in Belarus to 8 percent in Armenia.

Many interviewed sources confirm that civic apathy and disengagement is widespread across the region, even in countries that have relatively good scores on indices for democracy and civil society. In Moldova, for example, local observers report general passivity and disillusionment, and little evidence of grassroots initiatives or other modes of civic activity that could complement a fairly stagnant CSO sector. This could partially be attributed to the fall of the short-lived

9 Pact, [Public Opinion Survey to Assess Changes in Citizens’ Awareness of Civil Society and Their Activities](#), 2015-2018.

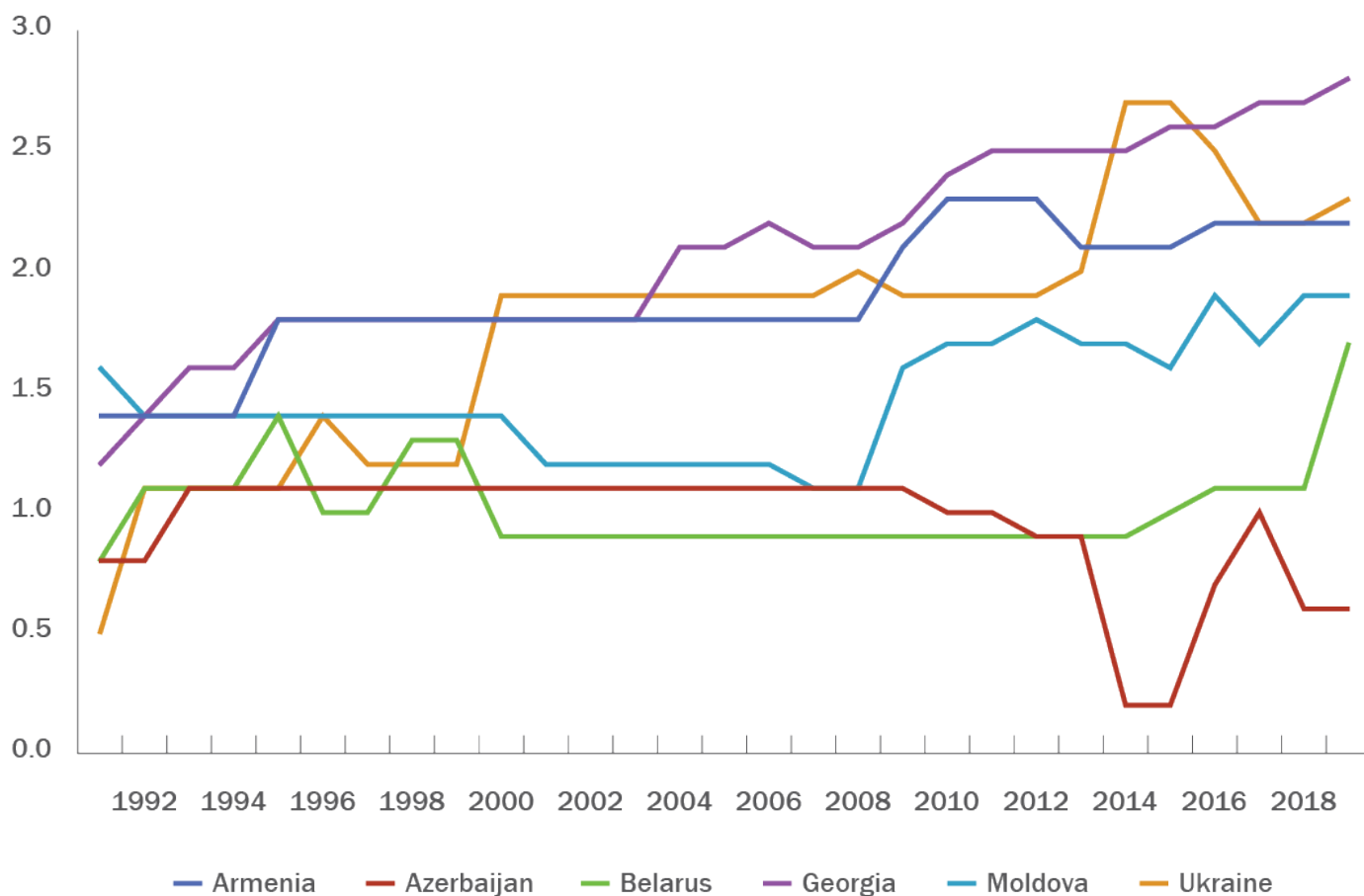
10 Democratic Initiatives Foundation, [Civil society in Ukraine: a view from the citizens](#).

11 e-baltic.org and Office for European Expertise and Communications, [Civil Society Organizations and Civic Initiatives in Belarus](#).

12 Pact World, [Belarus National Opinion Poll: Public Opinion Does not Change](#).

13 See [Social Cohesion and Reconciliation \(SCORE\) Index](#).

14 Charities Aid Foundation, [World Giving Index 2019](#).

Figure 1. Varieties of Democracy CSO Participatory Environment Rating, 1991-2019.

Source: Varieties of Democracy Project

Note: Lowest rating: 0; Highest rating: 3.

reformist government in 2019 and to a concerted anti-CSO campaign over the past two years.

Civic apathy remains prevalent in the EaP countries because most citizens do not believe that their engagement in civil society is likely to change anything. While in the early 1990s civic apathy was blamed on the “post-Soviet” legacy, today it is more a product of disillusionment over the failures in transitions. Even in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, citizens tend to not see the relatively pluralist and competitive political system as conducive to real change and so retreat from public sphere.

For example, Ukraine scores well in different democracy indices compared to the other EaP countries; its citizens mobilized successfully against the authoritarian turns of its rulers in 2004 and 2014; and its civil society is often described as vibrant for the region. Yet, in 2018 the SCORE project gave Ukraine a 4.5 out of 10 rating on citizens’ sense of agency, defined as “the degree to which one feels that ordinary people can change things in their community.” In one 2019 poll, 57 percent said it was very or somewhat unlikely that ordinary people could influ-

ence decisions made in Ukraine.¹⁵ In a similar poll last year, the figure for Armenia was 42 percent, perhaps reflecting the effect of the more recent revolution.¹⁶ In another 2019 survey in Ukraine, 15 percent said that most elected officials care about what common people think (compared to 22 percent in 1991 and 23 percent in 2009) and 21 percent said that the state is generally run for the benefit of all the people.¹⁷ In a 2019 poll in Georgia, 32 percent of respondents said that civil society had little or no impact on government, while 47 percent said it had a great or some impact.¹⁸ Meanwhile, in Belarus 80 percent said that they had not influence the national government and 75 on local government.¹⁹

Across the EaP countries, there is a mixed picture when it comes citizens' opinion of and trust in civil society.

Across the EaP countries, there is a mixed picture when it comes citizens' opinion of and trust in civil society. Looking at USAID's Sustainability Index's tracking of the sector's public image since 2000 indicates that Ukraine saw a marked improvement since; Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova a slighter one; and from lower levels Azerbaijan shows a clear deterioration and Belarus some progress. (See Figure 2.) This reflects the trends and clustering seen in with regard to participating in CSO activities in Figure 2.

Recent polls show that citizens to varying degrees hold more positive views of CSOs than some narratives suggest. In Armenia, 52 percent of respondents in one 2019 poll expressed a favorable opinion of

CSOs and 32 percent an unfavorable one.²⁰ A similar 2020 poll in Moldova had these numbers at 46 percent and 24 percent respectively.²¹ In a survey in Belarus last year, 69 percent said they had a positive attitude toward the activities of CSOs and civic initiatives, and 4 percent a negative one.²² At the same time, trust in CSOs is generally quite lower. According to various polls, around one-fifth of citizens in four of the EaP countries trust CSOs: Armenia (24 percent, 2017),²³ Azerbaijan (21 percent, 2013),²⁴ Georgia (20 percent, 2019),²⁵ and Moldova (18 percent, 2019).²⁶ Trust appears higher in Ukraine with two 2018 surveys placing it at 43-45 percent.²⁷ One 2019 survey in Belarus has trust at 57 percent.²⁸ These findings suggest that the degree of trust in CSOs is not closely correlated with the degree of political pluralism and competitiveness in a country.

The question of trust in civil society cannot be separated from the broader one of trust deficits among citizens. In a regional survey in 2017, when asked whether most people can be trusted, the share of those answering yes was 13 percent Armenia and Georgia 13 percent, 15 percent in Moldova 15, 23 percent in Belarus, and 28 percent in Ukraine.²⁹ According to the Caucasus Barometer, the share of positive answers to the same questions was 7 percent in Armenia in 2017, 9 percent in Azerbaijan in 2013, and 6 percent in Georgia in 2019. In one 2019 poll, 28 percent of

15 International Republican Institute, Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Ukraine, June 2019.

16 International Republican Institute, Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Armenia, September-October 2019.

17 Pew Research Center, European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism, October 2019.

18 International Republican Institute, Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Georgia, September-October 2019.

19 Pact World, [Belarus National Opinion Poll: Public Opinion Does not Change](#).

20 International Republican Institute, Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Armenia, September-October 2019.

21 International Republican Institute, Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Moldova, January 2020.

22 e-baltic.org and Office for European Expertise and Communications, Civil Society Organizations and Civic Initiatives in Belarus.

23 Caucasus Research Resource Centers, [Caucasus Barometer, Datasets](#).

24 Ibid.

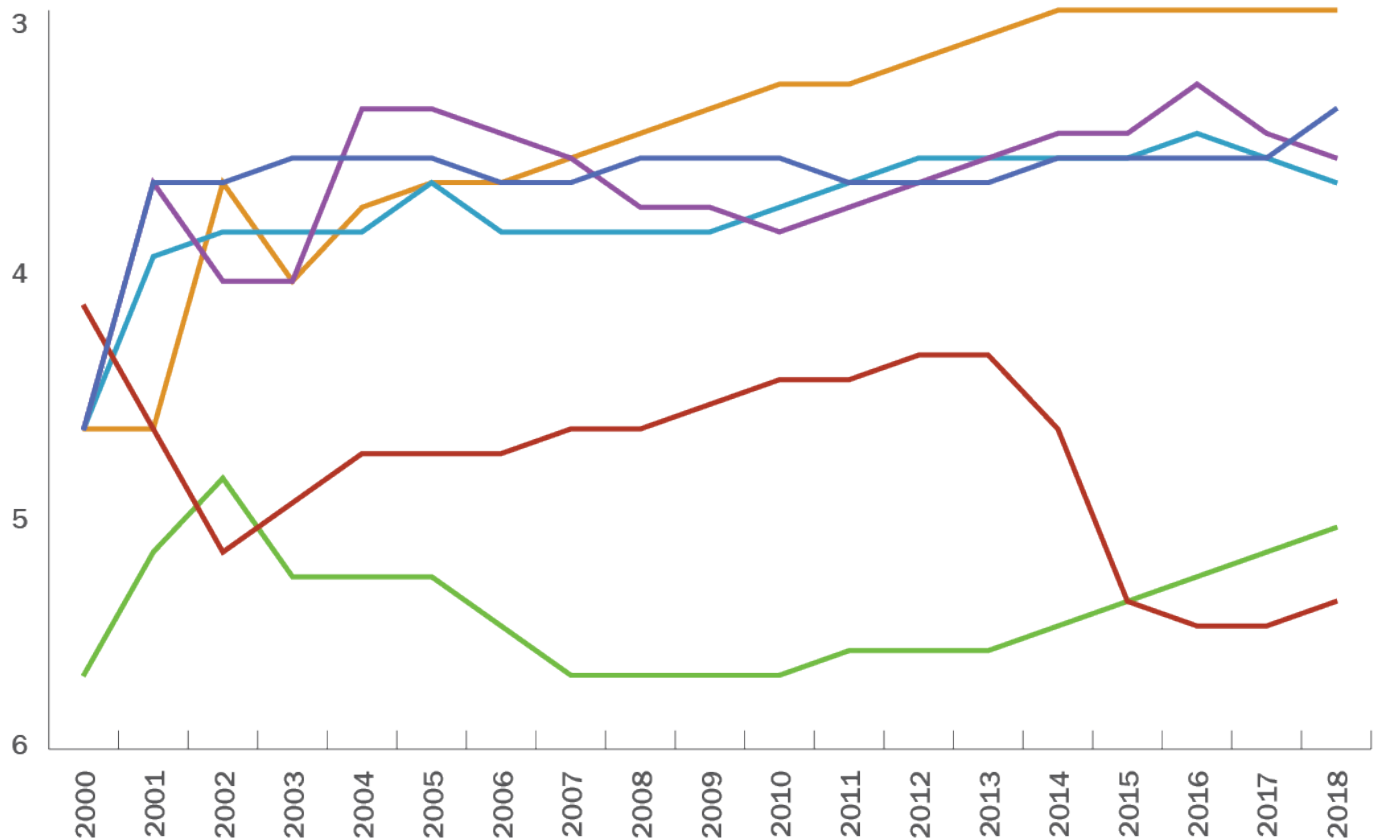
25 Ibid.

26 Institutul de Polici Publice, [Public Opinion Barometer](#), 2019.

27 USAID, 2018 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index: Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, September 2019

28 e-baltic.org and Office for European Expertise and Communications, Civil Society Organizations and Civic Initiatives in Belarus.

29 Pew Research Center, [Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe](#), May 10, 2017.

Figure 2. Civic Sector “Public Image” Rating, 2000–2018

Source: USAID Civil Society Sustainability Index yearly reports.

Note: Public image here is understood as “society’s perception of the CSO sector”, rated from 7 to 1, with a lower score indicating more sustainability

Ukrainian respondents said this.³⁰ These numbers suggest a slight decline in social trust in the Caucasus countries compared to when the World Values Survey asked the same question in 2001-14 but an increase for Ukraine.

Three further factors help explain the image and trust challenge faced by civil society in the EaP countries. First, CSOs are not very visible to broader society. Citizens often do not know about their work,

or they see them as “grant-eaters” or being too close to political elites. Many polls show that most citizens cannot name CSOs or explain their activities, whether national and smaller community organizations. CSOs lacking access to mass media compounds the problem. According to one 2018 poll in Ukraine, 65.5 percent said they were unaware of which CSOs were active where they live, and 7 percent said they knew CSOs that are active in the country.³¹ In Georgia,

30 Democratic Initiatives Foundation, [Civil Activism and Attitudes to Reform: Public Opinion in Ukraine](#), 2019.

31 Pact, [Public Opinion Survey to Assess Changes in Citizens’ Awareness of Civil Society and Their Activities](#), 2015-2018.

a 2018 study had one-third of respondents saying they did not know what CSOs do and 13 percent saying “they do nothing.”³² In Moldova in 2019, 34 percent said they knew “nothing at all” about civil society and 22 percent “little.”³³

As with all polls on civil society in the EaP countries, country data can be conflicting. For example, in Belarus in 2019, 61 percent in one poll said they were not aware of activities of any CSOs,³⁴ but in another 71 percent said they knew about the activities of CSOs and civic initiatives in their community or region, reflecting no doubt a greater tendency for people to engage in issues related to their local communities.³⁵

The issues on which CSOs work can also lead to higher or lower public awareness. In Ukraine, for example, those working on helping internally displaced people, monitoring elections, and fighting corruption are the best known.³⁶

Second, the existence of many “briefcase” NGOs—which exist only on paper to manage foreign grants—fuels the negative image of the sector. The “grant-eaters” problem is real, but it is also instrumentalized to discredit dissident voices or activists critical of the political elites. This appears more common in the relatively pluralistic countries where delegitimization campaigns substitute for open repression of civil society. In post-revolutionary Armenia, individuals and organizations have been targeted as “Soros stooges,” and in Ukraine some have begun to use this argument in particular to attack anti-corruption activists. In the ongoing crisis in Belarus, the authorities are increasingly pushing the “foreign influence” narrative to discredit the protests.

The third factor is the existence of GONGOs that tarnish the image of civil society as independent in all six EaP countries. Their presence is more obvious in the more autocratic ones, such as Belarus and Azerbaijan, while identifying them is more of a challenge elsewhere, such as in Armenia after the revolution or in Georgia. Overall, in all the countries CSOs are often thought of as created to serve political interests—and, indeed, many organizations are in fact subordinate to certain political forces. Citizens see them as tools in competition between elites that leads to resource redistribution among those rather than to structural change. In many ways, therefore CSOs are part of the problem of civic apathy, rather than perceived as a possible solution to it.

Citizens tend not to see getting engaged in politics as a way to bring about change.

The disconnect between CSOs and societies in the EaP countries is greatest when it comes to people’s passive, if not outright negative, attitudes toward politics and political activism. For example, in polls in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova last year, just over half of respondents said they had low or no interest in politics.³⁷ In Azerbaijan, people are not expecting any political change soon and have largely withdrawn from political activism. In Belarus, grassroots socio-economic or cultural initiatives have been increasingly vibrant. Still, there are no civic or political organizations acting as a backbone of the ongoing post-election protests. Across the region, citizens tend not to see getting engaged in politics as a way to bring about change.

There is also a tendency to see politics as a dirty, which is not surprising given the countries’ experience over the last three decades. The “revolving door”

32 USAID, 2018 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index: Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, September 2019.

33 Institutul de Poliți Publici, [Public Opinion Barometer](#), 2019.

34 Pact World, [Belarus National Opinion Poll: Public Opinion Does not Change](#).

35 e-baltic.org and Office for European Expertise and Communications, Civil Society Organizations and Civic Initiatives in Belarus.

36 Pact, [Public Opinion Survey to Assess Changes in Citizens’ Awareness of Civil Society and Their Activities](#), 2015-2018.

37 International Republican Institute, Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Armenia, September-October 2019 and Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Georgia, May-June 2019; Institutul de Poliți Publici, [Public Opinion Barometer](#), 2019.

between politics and civil society that there has been to varying degrees in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine does not seem to have changed this. In Georgia, members of civil society who came to power after 2003 ended up seen as no different than the old elite. In Moldova, a few who tried to become active in politics were shunted aside. In Ukraine, most of the civic activist elected to parliament after the Euro-maidan were gradually sidelined over the next years or were not re-elected in 2019. Members of Ukrainian civil society continue to work as consultants to politicians or in various partnerships and collaborative fora, but they are not very visible to the broader public. In Armenia, many civic activists have gone into the post-revolution government, leading to accusation of it favoring some CSOs over others.

In all six countries, the population does not see the work of advocacy and watchdog CSOs as essential.

In all six countries, the population does not see the work of advocacy and watchdog CSOs as essential, and neither are they the key actors in areas that are seen as important (such as the economy, local infrastructure, healthcare, and education). In a 2018 poll in Ukraine, electoral fraud was listed as the least likely issue to provoke citizen engagement, as opposed to issues such as housing or roads.³⁸ In another 2018 survey, activities related to corruption and electoral violations were the least popular causes for engagement for Ukrainians, despite corruption being among their top concerns.³⁹

One side effect of citizens' low interest in politics is that this contributes to the lack of public outcry or acts of solidarity phenomenon over even well publicized acts of repression or violence against civic activists or

CSOs. The murder of anti-corruption activist Kateryna Handziuk in Ukraine in 2018 is one of the most notorious examples in recent years. The case received much media coverage and in one poll 84 percent said attacks on civic activists was a real national issue,⁴⁰ yet people did not protest in large numbers in reaction.

The predominance of socioeconomic concerns in society means that people are more likely to support CSOs that address these. Paternalistic attitudes continue to dominate and citizens tend to transpose these to civil society. The number of people who are prepared to self-organize to address their most pressing problems is very low. Recent data shows that EaP countries display varying high levels of viewing the state's role as a paternal one. According to the Caucasus Barometer, 71 percent of respondents in Armenia in 2017, 71 percent in Azerbaijan in 2013, and 48 percent in Georgia in 2019 said the government should be like a "parent who should take care of its children." In one 2019 poll in Ukraine, 47 percent said the state should be responsible for the well-being of each citizen while 35 percent said that this was up to citizens.⁴¹

What is more, lack of progress on major structural issues, such as pensions or healthcare, that cannot be resolved by community organizing appears to discourage citizens from self-organizing for small-scale local problems too. Civic initiatives to address the coronavirus pandemic in Belarus, however impressive, looked more like civic "fire brigades" than a society-wide self-organization.

The extension of paternalistic expectations of citizens from the state to civil society can sometimes be enhanced by the use governments make of CSOs. In some instances, often with encouragement from donors, they have brought in CSOs to act as partners or even as delegates in providing certain services to citizens. The transfer of some service-provision roles to civil society can be a double-edged sword in that it

38 USAID/ENGAGE. [National Civic Engagement Poll](#), Field work November-December 2018, conducted by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation.

39 Democratic Initiatives Foundation, [The dissatisfaction of Ukrainians with the current government is growing, while trust of civil activists increases](#), July 2018.

40 Democratic Initiatives Foundation, [Public Opinion: 27 November 2019](#).

41 Democratic Initiatives Foundation ["Civic Activism and Attitudes to Reform: Public Opinion in Ukraine"](#) May 14, 2019.

makes CSOs more essential and connected with citizens, but it can also undermine their independence—in appearance and in fact—from the state and political actors. Transforming CSOs into an extension of the state to which social welfare is outsourced can be a way for more authoritarian regimes to depoliticize or coopt civil society. In Azerbaijan, for example, a dozen state agencies provide funding to CSOs for projects on a wide range of issues including under the banner of addressing different “rights.”⁴² It is also possible for regimes to use CSOs, or more accurately GONGOs, to access donor funding, with Belarus as a case in point.

New trends in Civic Space and their impact on Attitudes

“Post-Sovietness” is often invoked to explain the state of civil society in the Eastern Partnership countries, but the latter is more the product of their trajectories over the past thirty years. Some talk of a “Soviet” mentality and “homo sovieticus” in a way that constructs an “other” juxtaposed with a new more active, more civically responsible citizenry. Yet the fact that many people say they regret the dissolution of the Soviet Union is not necessarily a sign of nostalgia for something that a growing number has no first-hand experience of but rather a reaction to their experiences since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Recent analyses of values and attitudes show that shared “post-Sovietness” is more an unjustified label for these countries’ social features than a description of reality. According to the European Values Study/World Values Survey (EVS/WVS) data, there are substantial differences between them regarding the “emancipative values” relating to individual freedoms and rights.⁴³ These have taken root much more in Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine than in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The countries have diverged over time,

with Georgia and Moldova making more progress in this regard while Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus regressed. This suggests that people’s propensity for more independent behavior and willingness to assume individual responsibility has evolved unevenly and unexpectedly in the six countries. At the same time, citizens of the EaP countries tend to hold traditionalist views on many sociocultural issues such as those relating to gender and sexuality, albeit with variations among them as well as generational differences.⁴⁴ This is closely connected to people’s attachment to their religious identity and to some degree to their degree of nationalism.

In terms of attitudes toward civil society, while people’s openness to civic engagement and favorable view of CSOs can grow, this may not extend for many to certain socioculturally sensitive issues. Thus, organizations or initiatives promoting certain rights (for example, of children or the disabled) can increasingly be seen as socially useful, generating citizen engagement and government responsiveness, but not those addressing such issues as LGBT or women’s rights. Without painting the six countries as uniformly traditionalist, CSOs working on issues challenging some traditional social values are at more risk of attacks from the state and some political actors. Such issues can also be used to discredit the whole pro-democracy agenda and civic actors identified with it. For example, this was noted in anti-EU campaigns in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine when they were preparing to sign Association Agreements.

Three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the generational change in which many observers of Eastern European civil society placed their hopes has mostly taken place. The share of populations born after independence is growing rapidly and more of these people are reaching the age where they can be civically active. For example, in Ukraine 14 million out of a population of 42.2 million was aged

42 USAID, 2018 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index: Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, September 2019.

43 Plamen Akaliyski and Christian Welzel, “Clashing Values: Cultural and Geopolitical Transformations of Post-Cold War Europe,” World Values Research 11 (4): 85-123, 2019.

44 Pew Research Center, [Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe](#), May 10, 2017.

thirty or less at the start of 2019.⁴⁵ This is not to say that the experience of living under the Soviet system has left no trace, particularly through the attitudes and values of older generations. However, younger cohorts have been shaped by more recent politics (which, as argued above, took different trajectories for the EaP countries).

While in many non-EaP countries people under 35 tend to have greatest propensity towards civic activism and greatest confidence in the future, in EaP there tends to be smaller gaps between them and the older cohort aged between 36 and 54. The most significant gap in polling data with regard to civic activism tends to be between those who are over 55 years old—that is, who had their formative years in the Soviet period—and younger cohorts. This suggests that the degree of exposure to the Soviet experience is a significant factor.

Generational change may explain why younger people are more likely to engage in civic activities that are less structured and more sporadic. They are less keen on developing permanent organizational and membership structures. Younger activists often choose not to formalize their civic efforts because they see this as constraining rather than enabling. Their initiatives are often tactically innovative. During moments of mass mobilization, they are also more likely to develop “supporting structures” or “services” that are focused on networking and information-sharing, especially with the help of new digital tools; for example, through independent reporting and media channels, infographics and other informational services, branding, and outreach. Overall, younger people are also more likely to move in and out of civic activism as they pursue different personal and collective projects. Their universe of civic activism is much more fluid.

A final consideration regarding generational change and civil society is that younger people are also not automatically more supportive of democracy and the liberal values upon which common concep-

tions of civil society rest. Two countries that regressed in their EVS/WWS “emancipative values” scores—Armenia and Azerbaijan—also have a narrower gap between the younger and the older generations.⁴⁶ Those who grew up under the rule of authoritarian leaders in Azerbaijan and Belarus have no memory or direct experience with a different political system and have been socialized into these regimes’ social and cultural practices. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has spanned the lifetime of younger generations, and its enduring political and social impact is likely to have made some younger people as conservative as the older “Soviet” generations or even more. In Belarus, on the other hand, polls register the biggest gap in attitudes between those under 34 years old and the rest of the population. Employed in the IT sector and used to ignoring the state and its authoritarian leader, Belarussian young generations are more similar to their EU counterparts.

Generational change may explain why younger people are more likely to engage in civic activities that are less structured and more sporadic.

Except for Belarus, the EaP countries have experienced protracted armed conflict and/or loss of territorial integrity since independence. These shape and polarize domestic politics, with repercussions for attitudes toward civil society. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts in Georgia are easily instrumentalized for political purposes, offering an easy avenue for efforts to discredit, delegitimize, or attack civic actors without meeting a reaction from the public.

Civil society can also appear marginal in relation to conflict issues as in the case of Transnistria in Moldova. In Ukraine, the war that began in 2014 gave

45 State Statistic Service of Ukraine. [Accessed April 5, 2020]

46 Plamen Akaliyski and Christian Welzel, “Clashing Values.”

a strong boost to civic sentiment and initiatives, but the lack of progress on resolution is generating fatigue and disillusionment over time. Some civic actors also experienced direct negative effects of the securitized and cultural-nationalistic policies adopted by President Petro Poroshenko to deal with the conflict. Even though Belarus does not have a conflict, apprehension about one influences its civil society through self-censorship, especially since the start of the conflict in Ukraine, out of fear that a political crisis might be exploited by Russia.

Civic apathy and distrust in institutions increases susceptibility to conspiracy theories and vulnerability to propaganda.

These conflicts permeate collective identities and reshape nation-building discourses. This has two broad effects that directly impacts civil society and attitudes toward it.

First, it has enabled to varying degrees the securitization of the public sphere. Related tensions and security concerns are often used to push polarizing narratives and witch hunts. The artificial division between “real patriots” and “latent or open traitors” ease the path to the persecution of opposition and of dissent by the authorities. What is more, this makes civic actors more likely to coalesce around in-group identities at the expense of reaching out to others. More nationalistic groups are likelier to thrive as they feel legitimized and encouraged by such narratives.

Second, the limited prospects for conflict resolution reinforces for some citizens the sense of having little or no agency over one’s future noted above, which encourages beliefs about the pointlessness of engaging in politics and active citizenship.⁴⁷ The inability to project a positive future, even if not equally

pronounced in all conflict-affected EaP countries, is a significant hindrance to civic engagement.

The civic apathy and distrust in institutions in the EaP countries increases citizens’ susceptibility to conspiracy theories and vulnerability to propaganda and disinformation. Governments or domestic and foreign political actors thus find it easier to use these tools against opposition and dissenting voices as well as civil society generally. Spreading rumors and lies about civic actors is one of the tactics used to discredit civic actors. This uses and exacerbates the existing low levels of trust toward CSOs and their negative image as “grant-eaters,” especially from foreign funders.

Attacks on CSOs as foreign agents to justify curtailing civil society have not been as prominent in the EaP countries as in Russia, but this happens and can gain traction, even in more pluralist contexts. A 2019 study has 60 percent of respondents in Georgia and 47 percent in Ukraine saying shrinking civic space is a problem—but at the same time 45 percent in Georgia and in 39 percent in Ukraine say that CSOs are “foreign agents.”⁴⁸ The survey finds further that the governments of Georgia and Ukraine have used this claim to criticize Russian instead of Western influence, which likely explains it is believed by citizens who are oriented toward Russia and the West alike.

Defamation and demonization attempts often highlight and overstate the differences in salaries between people working on foreign-funded CSO projects (in one expression, “Radisson Hotel” activists) and the average citizen. They also attack CSOs for lack of accountability to domestic constituencies. For example, in Ukraine anti-corruption activists have been accused of embezzling foreign funds. In Armenia, members of Adekvad (a group launched in June 2018 on Facebook) post online texts and livestream videos that claim that the involvement of Western-educated people in the state administration is “the second stage of the Armenian genocide” and that “[George] Soros

⁴⁷ See, for example, the 2018 report on Nagorno-Karabakh by International Alert, which notes a phenomenon of people’s “learned helplessness.” Quoted in Thomas de Waal and Nikolaus von Twickel, *Beyond Frozen Conflict: Scenarios for the Separatist Disputes of Eastern Europe*, Centre for European Policy Studies, 2020, p. 209.

⁴⁸ Gerard Toal, John O’Loughlin and Kristin M. Bakke, “[Are some NGOs really “foreign agents”? Here’s what people in Georgia and Ukraine say.](#)” openDemocracy, April 16, 2020.

is provoking a civil war.”⁴⁹ Such aggressive tactics by political actors or radical groups is easily debunked, but debunking does not reach all of their audience.

There is also evidence that anti-CSO disinformation in the EaP countries is promoted by actors that receive direct support from Russia or are Russia-based, as part of the Kremlin’s strategy to influence these countries and retain its regional influence. Such support tends to go to conservative groups, with or without links to the Orthodox church, that openly reject liberal values and question the “morality” of Western influence. This encourages radicalization and polarization within their societies, with negative consequences for the attitudes of some segments of the citizenry toward civil society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There are key trends in the development of civil society that the six Eastern Partnership countries share despite the differences in their political and economic evolution over the past thirty years. On the negative side, they still have relatively weak associational life despite considerable efforts by civic activists and CSOs, as well as large amounts of external financial and technical assistance, to foster a vibrant civil society. Civil society remains weak in terms of active civic engagement and civic apathy, even in those countries that are relatively democratic and have seen mass mobilization at critical junctures lead to political turnovers. It is affected also by enduring trust deficits in society as well as by citizens’ weak sense of political agency. These encourage negative attitudes toward and mistrust of CSOs. In turn, this makes it easier for political and other actors to curtail, defame, demonize, and victimize civic actors of all kinds. And, while these issues are not directly addressed in this paper, in all six countries, civil society also suffers from deficiencies of the state and from regional geopolitical issues.

The picture is not only negative, though. Civil society in each EaP country has clearly grown and

developed in positive directions, including increasingly through genuine grassroots organizing. This is true even where there have been enduring authoritarian regimes or semi-authoritarian ones for long periods. Civic landscapes are populated by a greater variety of actors: traditional formal CSOs, grassroots and informal initiatives, online civic leaders, GONGOs, illiberal or nationalist-traditionalists groups and organizations, and even radical violent groups (as detailed in an accompanying paper to this one.)⁵⁰ While the gap between the general public and CSOs is real, it is not necessarily as clear-cut as some narratives hold; the picture is more complex and the dynamics more subtle. Ongoing generational change is introducing new features in terms of general attitudes and of modes of civic organization and action. The resulting new initiatives and forms of civic activism may still form a relatively small part of the sector, but they point to a promising shift in attitudes and behaviors on the part of at least some citizens.

Any “post-Soviet” uniqueness these countries may have displayed is now much diminished and diminishing.

Any “post-Soviet” uniqueness these countries may have displayed is now much diminished and diminishing. Their civil societies increasingly look like those in other parts of the world, in terms of potential as of problems. Although they maintain a degree of path dependency from their Soviet experience, the past thirty years have brought new positive and negative experiences that have shaped citizens’ attitudes toward civic action, as much and perhaps even more.

Perhaps the most fundamental problem for the development of a more vibrant civil society in the EaP countries—and for the efforts of donors such as the EU and the United States that try to encourage this—is an enduring societal vicious circle. Low sense

49 Armen Griroryan, “[“Armenia first”: behind the rise of Armenia’s alt-right scene.](#)” September 4, 2019.

50 Rosa Balfour, Laura Gelhaus, and Marta Matroková, *The Changing Landscape of Civil Society in Eastern Europe*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, September 2020.

of agency and low interest in, and dislike of, politics on the part of citizens combine to breed civic apathy. This in turn entrenches low levels of civic engagement. Though this is not the only or perhaps even the main obstacle to political and socioeconomic transformation in these countries, civic inaction contributes to the problem. And initial negative attitudes toward politics and the ability to be agents of change is reinforced when citizens see little or no such change—thus entrenching the vicious cycle.

Other underlying societal factors closely connected to this cycle are also major obstacles to the progress of civil society: low levels of social trust, sociocultural sensitivities, paternalistic thinking about the relationship between individuals and state or non-state institutions, and generational attitudes gaps. Less connected but also important is the securitization of civic and political life that comes mostly as the result of regional geopolitical and conflict dynamics.

The impact of these fundamental societal factors in the EaP countries on the state of civil society manifests itself in ways that vary in intensity across them but are nonetheless widespread. They include:

- CSOs experiencing low membership, donations, volunteering, and participation in their activities;
- Citizens' relatively low trust in CSOs, even where they tend to view CSOs more favorably;
- CSOs being viewed by many citizens as “grant-eaters,” foreign agents, or tools of political actors;
- Public acceptance or lack of reaction to closing-space measures and attacks on civil society;
- Less citizen support for and government engagement with civic actors working on political or socioculturally sensitive issues compared to those working more as providers of public services or state substitutes in socioeconomic spheres
- Increasing the vulnerability of civic actors to propaganda, disinformation, defamation, and demonization

The underlying dynamics affecting attitudes to civil society and the way they manifest themselves pose tremendous challenges not only to domestic civic actors in their operations and in their attempts to change people's behavior but even more so to donors that support them. External actors that fund or implement assistance to civil society around the world have learned many lessons about how better design and carry out programs to address a range of policy problems, but even in these cases effecting change is elusive. Addressing the issues raised here—with their broader, more diffuse, and less tangible nature—pose a much more complex challenge for domestic and external actors. Few obvious, straightforward programmatic solutions suggest themselves and the necessity of accepting only very gradual progress over a long time is inescapable.

Few obvious, straightforward programmatic solutions suggest themselves and the necessity of accepting only very gradual progress over a long time is inescapable.

Bearing this in mind, there are nonetheless measures that can help societal attitudes change toward active citizenship and thus a healthier civil society. Because these underlying factors are deeply rooted and concerned for the most part with people's fundamental—and perhaps often not entirely consciously held—views and values, domestic actors and donor should not expect them to be susceptible to interventions aiming at direct cause-and-effect results, even in the long term. But experience in the region and in other parts of the world shows that such views and values can evolve, and that well-conceived, sustained efforts to encourage this evolution can be part of the process of change. While there is no silver bullet, interventions that are already to different degrees present in the civil-society-development toolkit can be used or adapted to coax the required evolution in citizen's attitudes and behavior.

Making Civic Engagement More Attractive

CSOs becoming more financially independent can reduce negative attitudes toward civil society that hamper civic engagement. Donors should therefore encourage legal and fiscal reforms that make it easier and more attractive for individuals and businesses to give money to civic actors—not only on sustainability grounds but also very visibly to the public so as to counter the image of CSOs as reliant on grants and serving the interests of grant-makers. Alongside such reforms, targeted donor programs can also develop the capacity of CSOs to earn money by selling services, again with an emphasis on making more visible to the public. Even where the financial impact of such activities is limited, their visibility can change attitudes to civil society and foster civic engagement.

In this context, donors should also promote the incorporation of philanthropic culture and corporate social responsibility into civic-education programs, as well as cross-sectoral partnerships between civic actors and local businesses of various kinds. They can also support the development of the capacity of CSOs (especially newer and smaller ones) in the direction of more business-like financial management. This can be done through in-person and online training schemes of varying intensity, up to formal educational structures, as in the case of Ukraine's first Masters in Non-Profit Management course offered by Ukrainian Catholic University.

A concerted and substantial effort is needed to communicate better to the public in countries where structural reforms have been undertaken in recent years what progress is being achieved and the role of civil society in this, given that much incremental change is invisible to citizens, thus fostering a false impression of stasis and inefficiency. These communications should not be “cheerleading” public-relations exercises but instead offer an honest picture of reform processes that include the successes and failures of civil society's participation, and a clear message about the reasons for both. They should also offer a realistic view of the value and limitations of the role of CSOs in government efforts at national transformation.

This can help reduce people's disillusionment about reforms—especially in more recent post-revolution contexts in Armenia and Ukraine—and related negative views of civil society.

Reducing Mistrust of CSOs

Promoting greater CSO transparency can improve the public's trust toward them. The more citizens see which civic actor does what with what funds, the more trust in civil society is reinforced and negative messaging about it is countered. Donors should encourage and support CSOs to improve the information they make available to the public. This should go beyond “passive” transparency—making more information available in easily accessible and understandable ways—to “proactive” transparency—taking information to the public through dedicated activities. Donors can support this at the level of individual CSOs but also sector-wide through existing common civic platforms. Proactive transparency by CSOs can also be combined with civic education and civic literacy programs, so that activities to instill in citizens greater knowledge about the role of civil society (and their relation to it) can use concrete examples about organizations that are active where they live. These efforts can also tap the existing expertise in the civic sector in the form of open-data initiatives and activists that have focused on state information but can bring lessons for publicizing information from within civil society.

To mitigate the more negative attitudes toward civil society in older generations, donors should encourage and support CSO activities that are designed to be cross-generational. Given the differences between older and younger age groups with regard to such factors as use of digital technology and the demographic-geographic context in each country, cross-generational programs that address more local concerns with visible, short-term impacts on daily lives are likely to have the most potential for changing attitudes. They could also have more impact if carried out jointly by newer CSOs and older benefit-distributing organizations (such veterans or pensioners associations). What is more, if they are initiated by large or national CSOs,

it is important that they be designed in consultation with groups representing older citizens so that they are stakeholders from the start.

Existing and new cross-regional civil society networks within countries can also be used to convey the message nationwide that civil society is not dominated by or entirely consisting of CSOs in the capital and major cities. This would help reduce in rural and provincial settings views of civil society as remote, metropolitan, or foreign. Donors in many cases already support the development of nationwide CSO networks and they can promote these having a component of public outreach to inform citizens of the composition and breadth of activities and issues covered by the civic sector.

Reducing Civic Actors' Vulnerabilities

Domestic civic actors, supported by donors, should make a greater concerted effort to design activities that advertise closing-space developments and their negative consequences, and try to capitalize on any existing awareness of citizens that this is a problem for their country. But these will not be sufficient to change apathy about the curtailment and targeting of civil society, and they need to be combined with the transparency and publicity measures above so that they are not simply “defensive.” These measures also need to work through, as much as the national context allows, cooperation between CSOs and traditional media (especially television), which remain the principal source of information for the large majority of people. Efforts to publicize the closing-space problem, and in particular harassment and attacks on civic activists, also need to use more storytelling techniques to put a human face—preferably local—on the problem. This is because people are more likely to react to threats and violence if they were made aware from early on that targeted victims are average members of their communities rather than anonymous external or remote actors.

Connected to this, more efforts must be made to combat the narrative of civic actors as foreign agents while it is still at a relatively early stage of development

in the EaP countries. Civil society in the region has considerable experience in dealing with disinformation of all types, domestic and foreign, which can be used specifically to counter foreign-agent demonization campaigns. There may be in this case special potential in multinational EaP efforts that would expose this sort of disinformation as a tool that is used against civil society regardless of the exact ideological or geopolitical nature of each regime.

It is necessary to combat the widely held notion that civil society is not “clean” if it engages with the “dirty” world of politics, which feeds low trust in CSOs and civic actors. Related to this, it is also important to counter the impression that the only “political” role of civic activists is when they run for office or join the government. On both counts, the civic sector collectively (as much as possible) should work on public-information campaigns that highlight the less visible and less controversial political work it performs, such as by helping draft legislation and providing technical support to legislatures or local and national administrative bodies. It is important to change the very limited public visibility of such contributions; for example, by “branding” reforms that are co-authored by civil society. Donors can play a part in this not only by supporting CSOs in this kind of public information but also by encouraging state institutions to publicize more the nature of civil-society contributions to political processes.

The issue of GONGOs touches closely on that of negative attitudes to civil society as subservient to political actors. The delicate matter of whether or how donors should engage with them is beyond the scope of this paper but, to the extent donors grapple with it, they should factor in their calculations the impact that any engagement with GONGOs will have on citizens' views of and trust in civil society. In this regard, it is advisable to distinguish between GONGOs in authoritarian regimes where they are effectively part of state structures, and GONGOs in more pluralist regimes where some may be more political associations instrumentalized by elites. Any donor engagement with such “politically associated CSOs” should

include an element of appropriate transparency and public messaging to avoid this contributing to views of civil society as untrustworthy because it is part of the political sphere.

When it comes to conflict issues, there should be greater efforts to show that civic actors make positive contributions in relation to national security and thus counter the negative impact of the securitization of civic life. CSOs that work on conflict-related issues should be encouraged to focus on delivering and publicizing outcomes that show that they bring some tangible human-security benefits to the country even

if—understandably—they are not able to affect change in the conflicts themselves. To counter the instrumentalization of conflicts to demonize civil society—for example, as “unpatriotic”—truth-finding and fact-checking initiatives aimed at disseminating balanced information about all aspects of life on both sides of conflict lines can help counterbalance disinformation and would also legitimize the practice of talking about conflict issues in a neutral way. This too implies collaboration where possible between mass media and civic actors.

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