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From Ambition to Reality

*The Civil Society Dialogue Between the EU
and Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine*

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Summary

The EU conducts a dialogue with civil society in membership candidate countries through formal mechanisms and informal channels. At the same time, civil society in these countries is expanding and diversifying, as well as facing restrictions. This places new demands on the dialogue mechanisms to remain accessible, representative, and relevant. In three countries of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP)—Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—these face constraints. Restrictive environments, particularly in Georgia, along with smear campaigns and resource scarcity undermine participation by civil society organizations (CSOs). As a result, not all can access and use the mechanisms effectively. And some that do often lack clarity about the impact of their contributions.

The formal EU-CSO dialogue rests on a dual structure. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), including its national platforms, addresses regional policy, while the bilateral Civil Society Platforms established under the Association Agreements focus on bilateral relations in the context of accession. These mechanisms are complemented by informal channels such as ad hoc meetings, consultations, thematic events, and joint initiatives, usually coordinated by EU delegations.

This framework functions but could be strengthened. Its effectiveness and relevance are hindered by several factors. Financial sustainability is fragile; inclusiveness is increasingly difficult to maintain as the number and diversity of CSOs grows; and participation from outside capital cities remains limited. There is an overreliance on large CSOs that influence the mechanisms by providing resources and by shaping the agenda. Many CSOs—particularly smaller, grassroots, and youth-led ones—lack the resources to engage or are unaware of how to access the process. The mechanisms, and the EU itself, lack a clear perspective on how inclusive the dialogue truly is.

Larger, capital-based CSOs are more familiar with the dialogue mechanisms, better able to engage effectively, and more likely to perceive their input as influential in shaping EU policy. Smaller, grassroots, and periphery-based CSOs often lack this awareness, capacity, and access, leaving them underrepresented. This risks skewing the EU's engagement toward the larger, more visible actors while sidelining important perspectives. A systematic EU policy to support and involve smaller CSOs is needed to ensure a more inclusive, balanced, and representative dialogue.

Participation in the dialogue mechanisms should be broadened to include thematically underrepresented and geographically dispersed CSOs, with consultations decentralized and supported by multilingual resources and digital tools. Clear participation targets would help ensure diversity. Targeted awareness-raising by EU delegations, using clear language and diverse communication channels, would strengthen CSOs' understanding of how to and why participate. Transparency should be enhanced through regular publication of consultation opportunities, outcomes, and feedback reports, alongside thematic summaries of how CSO input shapes EU policies. The role of EU delegations must be reinforced. Finally, capacity-building and sustained financial support are essential to enable meaningful engagement, ensuring that the EU-CSO dialogue remains an inclusive and impactful component of the accession process.

Introduction

The dialogue between the EU and the civil society organizations (CSOs) in candidate countries is hindered by limited sustainability, inadequate awareness and inclusiveness, and misunderstandings about how the process operates. Although the EU acknowledges the importance of involving CSOs in the accession process and having increased the range of civil society dialogue mechanisms, particularly for the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, the potential for this remains partially untapped and is only moderately understood by CSOs, as well as by the public in candidate countries. Most EU documents and actions describe the involvement of CSOs in the accession process in broad terms, which leads to a lack of predictability and to misunderstandings regarding the institutional structure, activities, and objectives of the dialogue with civil society. Several issues hamper the dialogue. First, it is difficult for the mechanisms involved to be sustainable, due to an increasingly hostile working environment for CSOs in some of the candidate countries and to the scarcity of resources involved. Second, the mechanisms face challenges in boosting their visibility, enhancing their membership, and preserving their inclusiveness, especially as the number and diversity of CSOs in each country grows. Third, there is uncertainty about the actual impact of the participation of CSOs, largely due to the lack of transparency in the consultation process and limited clarity on how their input influences the EU's understanding of the situation and reforms in their countries. These obstacles can reduce the impact of the dialogue and even lead to misinformation. Some CSOs may be left unable to participate in the dialogue, or else be unaware of the opportunities. Strengthening and expanding the EU's dialogue with civil society is essential for advancing its integration goals and upholding its core values in candidate countries, particularly amid current challenges there and the risk of stagnation in the accession process.

This paper examines the dialogue between the EU and CSOs in three EaP candidate countries—Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—by analyzing the evolution of the structured mechanisms and the more informal channels of collaboration developed for this in recent years, as well as the capacity of CSOs to use them and, thereby, to exert influence. These mechanisms reflect the EU's recognition of the key role that CSOs play in the accession process in the EaP countries and its understanding that institutionalized dialogue is essential alongside informal consultations.

First, the paper provides an in-depth review of the civil society dialogue mechanisms: their evolution, operation, engagement processes; their complementarity; and the extent to which their input is reflected in EU policies. Second, it assesses the sustainability, representativeness, and inclusiveness of these mechanisms, while exploring the awareness and capacity of CSOs to participate effectively and their potential to be gradually integrated in the institutional relationship between the EU and the three countries. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for enhancing the EU-CSO dialogue, recognizing the critical role that civil society plays in the accession process.

Inclusive in Form, Exclusive in Practice?

CSOs are considered key actors in supporting the accession process and promoting EU values in candidate countries, as well as helping the EU assess the status of reforms as regards the negotiation chapters. The EU has long recognized CSOs' crucial role and has repeatedly stated its commitment to establish sustainable

mechanisms for dialogue with them. This commitment has been highlighted in various documents over the past decade, in the general context of the EU's external relations and, more specifically, in relation to enlargement. For example, this was stressed in the 2012 communication titled *The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe's Engagement with Civil Society in External Relations*, and the complementary EU roadmaps for engagement with CSOs, and later in the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 Guidelines for EU Support to Civil society in the Enlargement Region.¹

In the case of the EaP countries, the EU's 2021 Joint Staff Working Document *Recovery, Resilience, and Reform: Post-2020 Eastern Partnership Priorities* places strong emphasis on fostering an enabling environment for civil society and building strategic partnerships with CSOs.² Independent analyses confirm that CSOs in the region have frequently been the driving force behind reforms in numerous areas for alignment with the EU acquis, including regarding human rights, democracy, gender equality, independent media, or environmental protection.³ In December 2023, key decisions regarding the EU membership path of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine were taken. The European Council granted Georgia candidate status, acknowledging that the country had taken some necessary steps for this, and it decided to open accession negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine. The analytical reports and recommendations accompanying these decisions stressed the need to strengthen the CSO sector in

Methodology

For this paper, an online survey was conducted that received responses from 167 CSOs in Georgia (49), Moldova (56), and Ukraine (62) between September 2024 and January 2025. The CSOs approached were selected randomly from online public databases, and covering various areas, with a focus on democracy, EU policies, economic development, civic engagement, rule of law, environmental protection, and minority rights, all of which are key priorities on the EU's agenda. The survey comprised 15 open-ended or closed-ended questions aimed at evaluating the EU–CSO dialogue process. Of the CSOs surveyed:

- 48% are based in capital cities and 52% elsewhere.
- 44% are small (1–5 staff) and 56% medium-to-large (6+ staff).
- 57% had over ten years of activity, 10% had seven to ten years, 17% had four to seven years, 15% had one to three years, and 1% had less than one year.

The research also involved 21 interviews with representatives from EU delegations in Moldova and Ukraine, the European Commission's then Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and the national platforms, the bilateral Civil Society Platforms, CSO coalitions, and individual CSOs.

This sample cannot represent the entire CSO sector in the three countries, but the answers from respondents identify common stress points that are likely to apply for a larger number of CSOs. The interview findings are reinforced by complementary evidence from the survey.

all three countries. For Georgia and Moldova, the European Commission outlined specific reforms for them to take to enhance the role of CSOs in decision-making processes at all levels (notably, Priority 10 for Georgia and Step 8 for Moldova)⁴. Although no such specific requirement was addressed to Ukraine regarding its CSO sector, the Commission's assessment emphasized the importance of strengthening civil society.

The growing role of CSOs in the EU accession process has led to the growing EU dialogue with civil society in candidate countries. In Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, the dialogue operates through several formal mechanisms and informal channels. The formal dialogue has a dual structure: the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) addresses, in theory, the regional policy and the entire region, while the focus on relations between the EU and individual countries, particularly in the context of accession. The EaP CSF was established in 2009 alongside the European Neighbourhood Policy and institutionally embedded in the EaP architecture, and it remains one of the most prominent platforms for CSO engagement. It operates as a regional platform, with a secretariat in Brussels, and a national platform in each of the six EaP countries. The national platforms of the EaP CSF are country-specific groups that facilitate the implementation of EaP policy objectives within each of the six countries. They represent the interests of CSOs in their respective countries and play a key role in the EaP CSF's overall mission to promote integration, democratic reforms, and economic development in the region. More recently, bilateral Civil Society Platforms were set up following the EU signing Association Agreements with Georgia (2016), Moldova (2016), and Ukraine (2015). They are co-chaired by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and country representatives. These two mechanisms are supplemented by more informal channels such as ad hoc meetings, national or EU-level events, bilateral consultations, feedback requests, country visits, and joint initiatives, often coordinated by the EU delegation in the respective countries. Additionally, Domestic Advisory Groups were created under the EESC as part of the Association Agreements to monitor and support the implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas between the EU and the three countries.

The growing role of CSOs in the EU accession process has led to the growing EU dialogue with civil society in candidate countries.

There are numerous CSO associations involved in the dialogue too. The EU and the candidate-country governments may also involve civil society actors in various formats throughout the accession negotiation process, frequently seeking their expertise on specific topics part of negotiation chapters or including them in consultative councils. Among the candidate countries, the EaP ones have the advantage of this well institutionalized dual mechanism that is intended to provide their CSOs and the EU formal opportunities to address a wide range of issues, regardless of shifts in the stance of their governments on EU accession.

There are, however, sustainability concerns about these dialogue mechanisms, particularly in terms of their financial viability, institutional structure, and capacity to address a broad range of topics, which impacts civil society dialogue with the EU. The EaP CSF is funded by the European Commission and is heavily reliant on the latter's grants provided by on a three-year basis, with current funding secured only until 2026, leaving the platform vulnerable in the long run. The bilateral Civil Society Platforms under the Association Agreements face greater

financial uncertainty, as their activities depend almost entirely on their members' ability to integrate each one into other EU-funded or privately funded programs, and they almost completely lack dedicated resources or staff. These mechanisms risk focusing on a narrow range of members and often overlapping topics, and they lack the resources to expand their coverage to include subjects that reflect more marginal or the priorities of smaller or issue-based CSOs. This often results in a dominance by well-established and better resourced CSOs that have the capacity to carry out coordination and logistical tasks such as organizing structures or drafting internal regulations as well as to enhance the platforms' visibility by conducting reform analyses, drafting policy positions, and participating in national or EU-level events. This pattern applies also to the more informal consultation channels, which lack the visibility and influence to actively engage a greater number of CSOs. Overall, smaller organizations risk being sidelined from the dialogue with the EU, unable to fully contribute to or benefit from it.

Despite the efforts of the EU to increase the dialogue opportunities, many smaller local CSOs remain unaware of them or lack the capacity to influence the dialogue or to contribute actively to it.

Despite the efforts of the EU to increase the dialogue opportunities, many smaller local CSOs remain unaware of them or lack the capacity to influence the dialogue or to contribute actively to it. A major challenge is the centralization of most dialogue mechanisms, which are often based in capitals or even convened in Brussels, and include a limited number of larger organizations, with limited efforts to extend participation to organizations based outside large urban areas. Additionally, there are not enough thematic debates, which are essential for engaging a wider range of CSOs, as discussions tend to focus on a limited set of topics. Grassroots organizations and CSOs in peripheral regions, particularly informal civic groups or those operating in areas with shrinking civic space or primarily online, face substantial challenges—from limited opportunities to chronic underfunding, insufficient staff, and the absence of formal registration—that significantly hinder their ability to participate in the dialogue. Although the EU acknowledges these barriers, it has implemented few measures to help these CSOs overcome their limitations. The EU institutions, and especially the delegations in individual countries, lack the capacity to overcome these setbacks. Moreover, when CSOs manage to participate in dialogue, they often lack clarity on how their input influences policies or contributes to tangible outcomes. The larger dialogue mechanisms are also constrained by limited resources, which prevents them from significantly increasing their membership, from regularly evaluating needs and capacities, and from supporting long-term capacity-building programs for CSOs at risk of being sidelined. Without addressing these gaps, the dialogue risks excluding the smaller, issue-based CSOs whose voices are critical to ensuring the long-term success of the EU's objectives. Engaging these CSOs is particularly important for building trust and ensuring sustained support for EU accession, especially in peripheral regions with limited civic space and in communities that may feel left behind or where the advantages of the EU integration process are not yet fully visible.

The EU–civil society dialogue remains dominated by well-resourced CSOs, creating a structural imbalance, as the formal mechanisms platforms (the EaP CSF and bilateral Civil Society Platforms) and informal channels are often led or heavily influenced by the same organizations. While the EU and the mechanisms recognize the need

for broader inclusion, they can provide only limited incentives to remedy the situation. The introduction in 2015–2016 of the bilateral Civil Society Platforms has done very little to address this. In fact, the EaP CsF is still better positioned in this regard thanks to its broad base of associated CSOs and an institutional structure built around national platforms and working groups. The EU's stated commitment to engaging 2,500 CSOs—particularly grassroots ones, those supporting minority rights, and women's organizations in marginalized or conflict-affected regions—is promising⁵. This commitment is reinforced by the emphasis on enhancing regranteeing schemes and creating more inclusive spaces for local participation, as outlined in *Recovery, Resilience, and Reform: Post-2020 Eastern Partnership Priorities*. However, without structural changes to the operation of the mechanisms and clear objectives to improve representativeness, these efforts will remain insufficient to achieve meaningful inclusivity.

The sustainability of CSOs in the EaP countries is also increasingly at risk, reflecting internal struggles and external threats in recent years.⁶ This has severely weakened the capacity of many to engage effectively in the dialogue mechanisms with the EU. Civic space is shrinking, and the ramifications of Russia's war against Ukraine have exacerbated the environment in which CSOs operate. There have been numerous smear campaigns targeting CSOs, particularly against pro-EU ones, orchestrated by external actors linked to Russia, and their internal proxies. These campaigns have disproportionately targeted CSOs advocating human rights, women's rights, and minority rights, as well as those operating in areas with already limited civic space, all aligning with the objectives of Russian propaganda and further restricting CSOs' ability to participate in dialogue with the EU. In some cases, such campaigns have even led to legislative changes restricting CSOs, especially in Georgia where the government has introduced a Russian-style "foreign agent" law and other laws that pose a major threat to the civic sector. Additionally, CSOs face severe financial constraints, unpredictable and insufficiently diversified funding, and a lack of resources to support staff wellbeing, leading to widespread burnout. Although there are ongoing capacity-building programs funded by the EU and other donors, much more is needed to improve the sustainability of CSOs in the long run. At the same time, the situation worsened due to the impact of the ending this year of democracy and civil society support by the United States, which had been one of the major donors in the region.

The future of these mechanisms for the EU-CSOs dialogue will depend on ensuring their long-term sustainability and their ability to serve as reliable dialogue partners for the EU, regardless of shifts in the priorities of EaP governments or deadlocks in the accession process. Their current funding and operational model hinder their activities. The mechanisms and the CSOs in each country are exploring ways to achieve greater sustainability, whether through additional funding or institutional adjustments. An imperfect dialogue mechanism can significantly weaken the EU's ability to assess each country's progress toward accession and adherence to EU values. Therefore, it is crucial to enhance awareness and to build the capacity of the dialogue mechanisms, addressing sustainability, and ensuring their active participation and representativeness. Strengthening their role as key actors in upholding EU values and advancing their integration in the institutionalized dialogue between the EU and the EaP countries is essential. Moreover, civic space in these countries must be continuously strengthened, especially in the face of major challenges, as recently seen in Georgia. Ensuring the sustainability of the dialogue with civil society is not only vital for enlargement and for candidate countries' successful integration with the EU; it also supports the EU's capacity to project and promote its values by fostering and safeguarding the civic space in these countries.

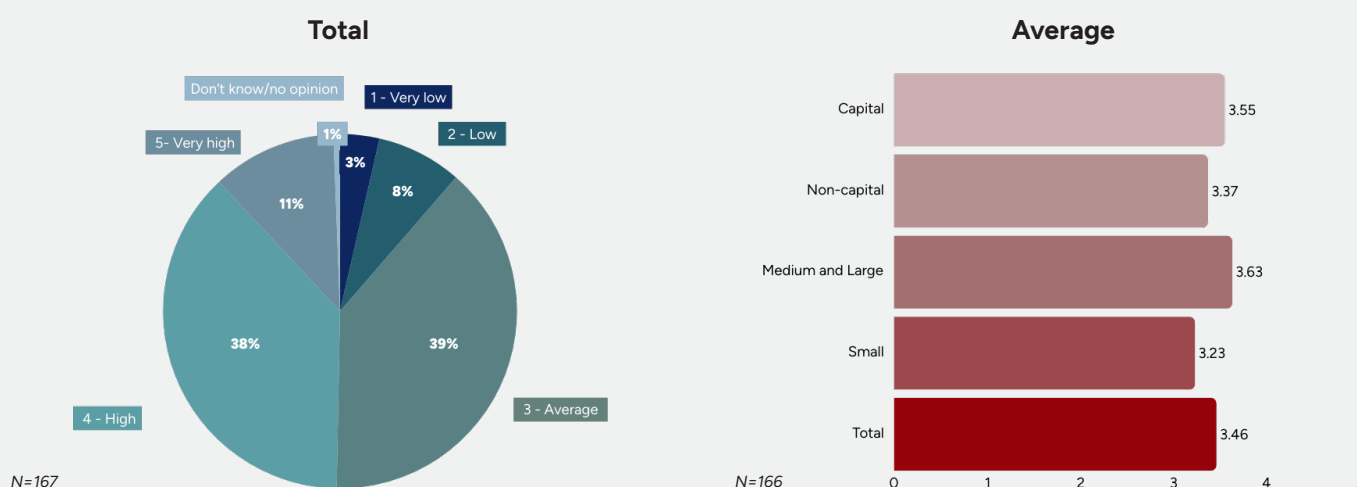
Key Dialogue Actors and Characteristics

Mapping the Dialogue Landscape

The evolving relationship between the EU and Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, along with their prospects of EU accession, has generally heightened CSOs' interest in staying informed and engaged in the process. This has gradually strengthened their interest in participating in the dialogue with the EU and to act as influential actors in integration while supporting EU values. There is an opportunity to enhance this dialogue as civil society in these three countries is not only committed to supporting EU accession but is also actively preparing to assist the governments and EU institutions throughout this lengthy process. The EU could therefore leverage CSOs as reliable dialogue partners and key actors in driving reforms, fostering progress. In the survey conducted for this paper, 49% of responding CSOs assessed the awareness of their country's CSOs about the EU integration process as high or very high, and 39% as average, while only 11% rated it as low or very low (Figure 1.) The average rating among capital-based CSOs was slightly higher than among others, as was that of medium-to-large CSOs compared to that among small ones. A similar pattern emerged regarding view of the capacity of CSOs to support the European Commission in the accession process: 59% said that this was high or very high, 31% that it was average, and 8% that it was low or very low (Figure 2.) In this regard, the average rating among medium-to-large CSOs was slightly higher than that among small ones, but there was no significant difference between capital-based and non-capital-based ones. Georgian CSOs rated their awareness and readiness to support the EU accession process higher than Moldovan and Ukrainian ones. These findings support the argument that civil

Figure 1. CSOs' Awareness and Understanding of the EU Accession Process.

How would you rate the awareness and understanding your country's CSOs of the stages and implications of the EU accession process in your country? (From 1 = very low to 5 = very high.)



Source: Survey by author.

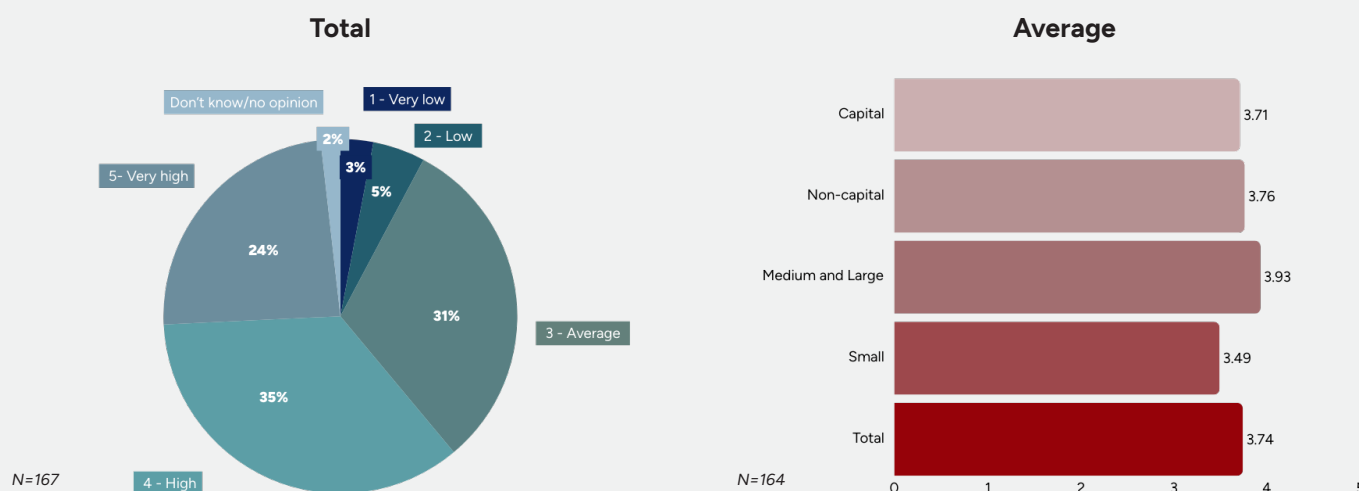
society in the three countries is committed to supporting the EU accession process while underscoring the need to address capacity gaps in their being able to do so.

As noted, in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, the EU–CSO dialogue relies on a mix of formal mechanisms—most prominently the EaP CSF and the bilateral Civil Society Platforms—alongside informal channels and direct contacts. Despite this diversity and active CSO coalitions, the dialogue faces persistent challenges, including sustainability, limited thematic reach, low visibility, constrained capacity to explain EU accession, and a more hostile operating environment, especially in Georgia. Many CSOs perceive participation as formal rather than impactful, due to unclear feedback and follow-up mechanisms.

The EaP CsF remains the most prominent and influential dialogue mechanism, encompassing nearly 450 CSOs in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, out of a total membership of close to 1,200 within its umbrella organization. Partially embedded within the EU architecture, it plays a significant role in shaping civil society's contributions to the implementation of the EaP policy. It operates through national platforms in each country and thematic working groups, participates in high-level meetings between the EU and EaP countries, organizes the annual EaP CsF Summit, and tracks reforms across the EaP countries. Although initially conceived as a regional cooperation mechanism, the EaP CsF actively supports EU accession in the three countries. The bilateral Civil Society Platforms established following the Association Agreements aim to foster collaboration between national representatives (CSOs, trade unions, and businesses) and EU representatives. They typically have very few

Figure 2. CSOs' Preparedness To Support Understanding of Reforms Related to EU Accession.

How would you rate the preparedness of your country's CSOs to support the European Commission in understanding and evaluating the reforms undertaken by your country as part of the accession negotiations? (From 1 = very low to 5 = very high.)



Source: Survey by author.

members and often struggle to expand their activities beyond biannual meetings and the publication of follow-up recommendations. However, some progress is evident with their gradual integration into the EESC architecture. For example, Ukraine's national platform has developed working groups and diversified its membership. Moldova's platform aspires to evolve into a standalone national economic and social committee, while Georgia's platform is also working to enhance its activities. Despite progress, challenges such as limited diversification of membership, overlaps between platforms, limited coordination, and resource constraints persist. Regarding their relationship with the larger EaP CsF, the bilateral Civil Society Platforms are naturally members of the national platforms—as full participants in Moldova and Georgia, and with observer status in Ukraine.

Other CSO coalitions are also active in the dialogue. Larger CSOs typically participate in working groups advancing reforms under the negotiation chapters, while the EU delegations facilitate numerous other direct bilateral contacts. The Domestic Advisory Groups are less prominent, with limited membership and low visibility within the CSO sector and among the general public.

Sustainability, Awareness, Inclusivity, and Representativeness

The primary internal challenge for the mechanisms for the EU's dialogue with CSOs is limited financial sustainability and access to funding, which has led to dependency on their more visible and resourceful members. The EaP CsF operates as a project-based initiative and is heavily reliant on three-year grants from the European Commission, with minimal diversification of resources. This dependency, especially for the national platforms, has created significant reliance on their better-resourced CSO members and limited their activities to volunteer efforts or to fit the priorities of larger, well-funded organizations. The national platforms lack legal personality and have limited resources. Support from the umbrella platform is modest, with only the national platform secretariats receiving some funding, which, as of 2025, is allocated on a competitive annual basis. Grants for small initiatives provide only minimal support. The bilateral Civil Society Platforms established under the Association Agreement face even greater financial constraints. They lack dedicated funding streams from either the EU or national governments, relying instead on members securing resources through other donors or EU projects. Like in the case of the EaP CsF, this instability leads to dependence on resourceful members or volunteer contributions, restricting their ability to expand operations and sustain long-term engagement. Other dialogue mechanisms face similar challenges, with their effectiveness tied directly to the resilience of larger participating CSOs. Funding constraints are a persistent issue for civil society in the EaP countries.⁷ Limited core funding, a scarcity of multiyear projects, and a predominant focus on short-term grants hinder the platforms' ability to increase their activities.

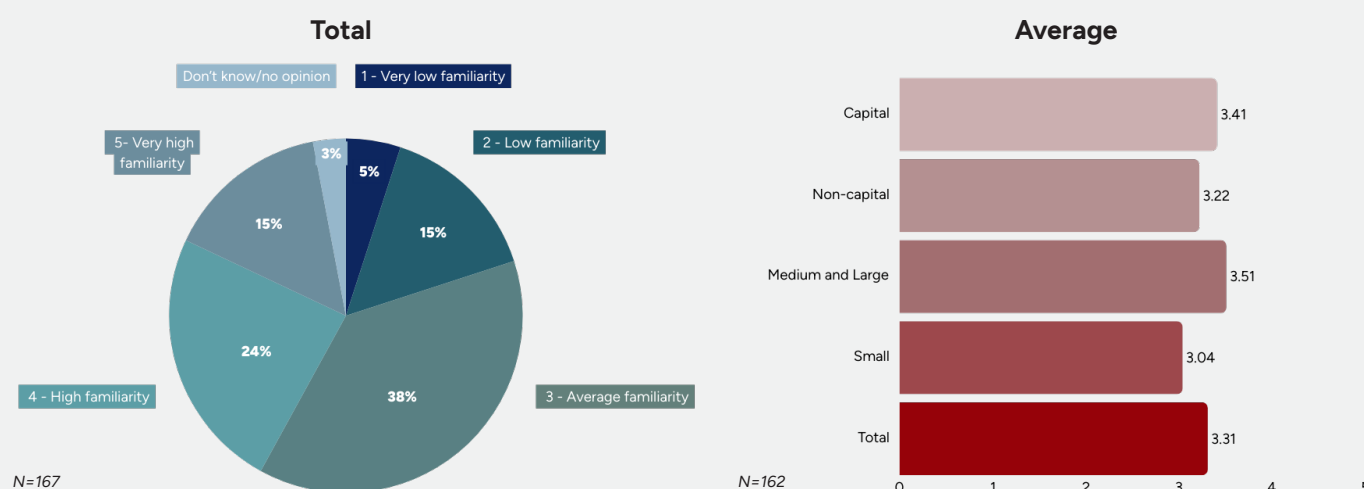
The EU-CSO dialogue is further affected by moderate awareness and understanding on the part of civil society regarding its functioning, which can significantly undermine its effectiveness. Unpredictability on how the dialogue works and a lack of clarity among many CSOs exacerbate this issue, with misunderstandings persisting even in the case of some of the more active ones. Awareness of the formal mechanisms and informal channels for CSO engagement remains limited, with even those that are members of well-known structures often unclear about how the dialogue operates, what is the impact of their participation, and how different platforms are involved. This challenge is compounded by perceptions of a selective approach in bilateral or smaller meetings with larger, more visible, technical, or "less conflictual" CSOs often being prioritized by the EU institutions, including the national

delegations. Additionally, there is a lack of horizontal coordination and understanding among platforms and CSOs regarding their engagement with the EU. The process is frequently criticized for insufficient transparency and the absence of follow-up activities, which makes it difficult for the public and CSOs to grasp the full picture. In the survey, 39% of responding CSOs said they had a high or very high familiarity the dialogue process, 38% an average one, and 20% a low or very low one. (Figure 3.) The average rating among medium-to-large CSOs was slightly higher than that among small ones, as was the case for capital-based CSOs compared to others. The scores in the three countries were relatively close, and highest in Georgia, likely due to the increased focus on EU accession amid political turmoil and widespread pro-EU protests. This discrepancy underscores the need for greater transparency and inclusiveness in the dialogue process to ensure broader participation and understanding across all CSOs.

A major obstacle to dialogue with the EU remains the uneven access to and engagement opportunities for CSOs, particularly smaller or issue-based ones and civic groups operating outside capital cities, which struggle to participate effectively. While participation is formally open to all and the dialogue mechanisms or other CSO coalitions have facilitated access, numerous barriers still hinder engagement. A key issue is the centralization of most mechanisms, with the larger platforms often capital-based or even convened in Brussels, with limited efforts to increase participation outside the capital cities. Additionally, thematic debates, which are crucial for engaging a diverse range of CSOs, are scarce, with discussions often limited to a narrow set of topics, leaving many organizations underrepresented. There is also a noticeable preference on the part of the EU institutions, including the delegations, for engaging with larger, well-established CSOs, such as think tanks, while smaller,

Figure 3. CSOs' Familiarity With the Dialogue With the EU on the Accession Process.

Are you familiar with how the dialogue regarding the accession process between the EU and your country's CSOs takes place? (From 1 = very low to 5 = very high.)



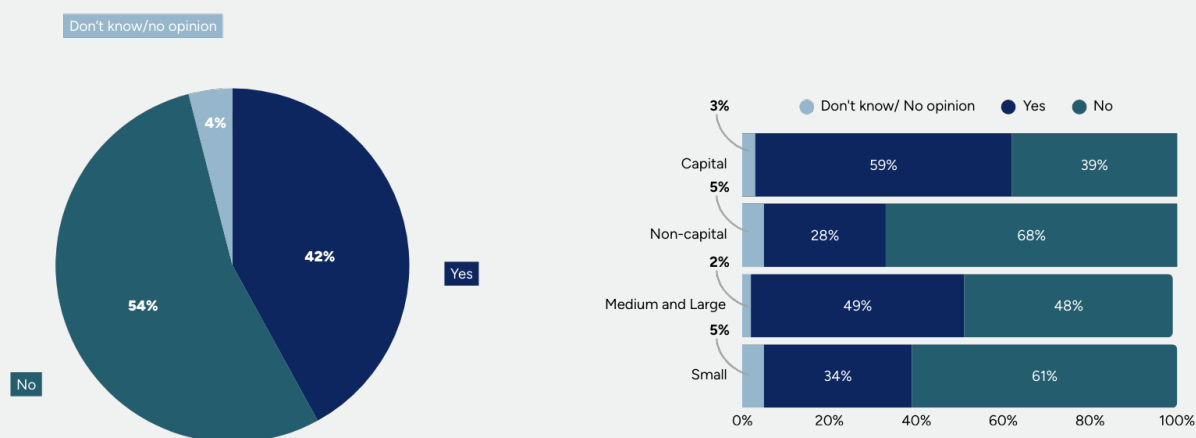
Source: Survey by author.

community-based organizations struggle to have their voice heard. The issue of limited funding and resources, which restricts the ability of many CSOs to participate effectively, compounds these challenges. Financial and logistical constraints, coupled with a lack of tailored support, create an environment that disproportionately benefits capital-based and well-resourced organizations. This not only excludes smaller and periphery-based CSOs but also widens the gap between local priorities or topics often perceived as less important and overlooked and the issues favored at the national and EU levels. As a result, the dialogue risks becoming less inclusive and impactful. The survey findings confirm these trends: 54% of responding CSOs reported not having participated in any form of consultation with the EU, while 42% say they did. (Figure 4.) The most cited obstacles to participation included language barriers, the perceived formality of the dialogue, time constraints, poor selection procedures and the absence of open calls, and insufficient information concerning the dialogue. Only 28% of responding CSOs based outside capital cities reported having participated compared to 59% from capital cities. Similarly, 34% of responding small CSOs reported participating compared to 49% of medium-to-large ones. The primary form of engagement reported are the EaP CsF national platforms, by 53% of CSOs that participated, while others mentioned various platforms, CSO forums, or other coalitions engaging with the EU. There were no major differences between the CSOs from Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine on this question.

Participation in the EU-CSO dialogue is often seen as meaningful by the CSOs when there is follow-up, their opinion is considered, and they understand how their contributions are used. Mechanisms such as the EaP CsF, the bilateral Civil Society Platforms, and even the Domestic Advisory Groups have become increasingly integrated in the work of EU institutions and demonstrated a tangible impact. Strengthening this integration into formal

Figure 4. CSOs' Participation in Consultations With the EU Institutions on the Accession Process.

Are you or have you been part of any type of structured consultation/interaction with the EU institutions in support of your country's accession process?



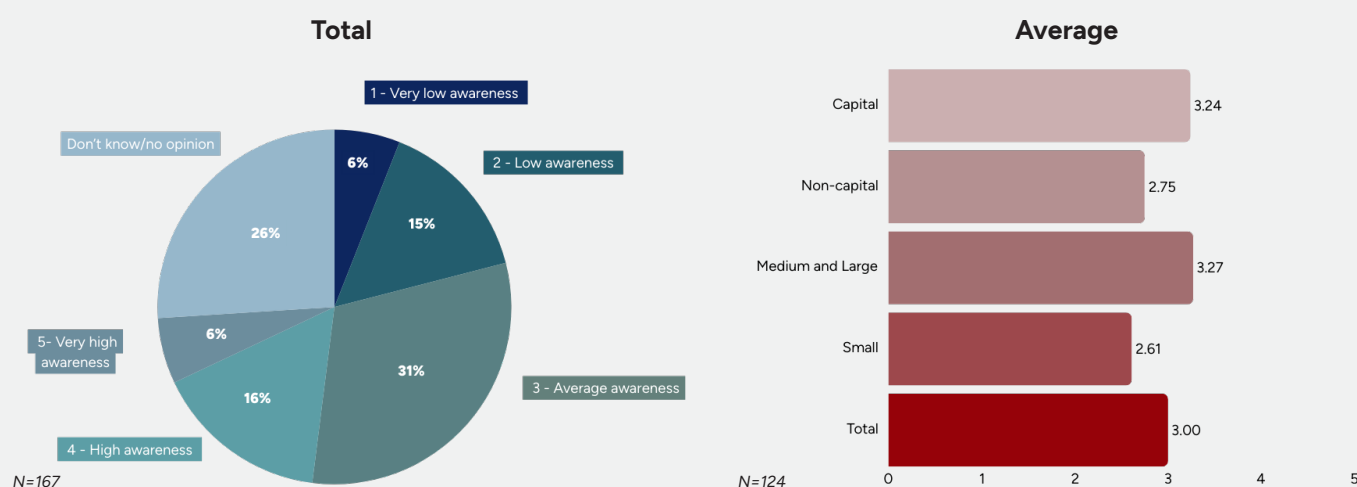
Source: Survey by author. N=167

structures can foster sustained, long-term engagement. The statements and recommendations from these mechanisms are frequently reflected in official EU documents and public statements, influencing EaP policies. For example, the gradual integration of the EaP CsF's participation in EU-EaP Senior Officials' Meetings and Foreign Ministers' Meetings highlights this influence. Similar trends are observed in the work of CSO coalitions. EU requests for CSO input are becoming more frequent, initially driven by the European Commission through bilateral meetings and annual or progress reports, by the EU delegations, and more recently by other actors such as the EESC and dedicated initiatives like the newly launched Enlargement Candidate Members' Initiative. This gradual integration enhances CSOs' awareness of their ability to influence EU decisions and the broader impact of their participation in dialogue mechanisms. However, numerous challenges remain. Many CSOs still struggle to understand how their participation and inputs are used. They often perceive many meetings as primarily informative rather than participatory, with limited feedback or follow-up mechanisms. In the survey, 31% of responding CSOs rated their understanding of how their input is used as average, 21% as low or very low, and 21% as high or very high (Figure 5.) Notably, 26% reported they did not know or did not answer the question. As with the other questions, the average rating among capital-based CSOs was slightly higher than among others, as for medium-to-large CSOs compared to small ones. There were no major differences between the CSOs from Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine on this question.

Inclusiveness is essential for the EU-CSO dialogue as civil society in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine continues to develop in terms of location, issues, and formalization, ranging from legally established CSO and think tanks to informal civic groups, online and offline. Any relevant dialogue must acknowledge these differences and adopt

Figure 5. CSOs' Awareness of the Use of Their Input in Consultations With the EU on the Accession Process.

If you ever participated in consultations regarding EU accession or have provided any input regarding your country's accession process, are you aware of how your input is used by the EU institutions? (From 1 = very low to 5 = very high.)



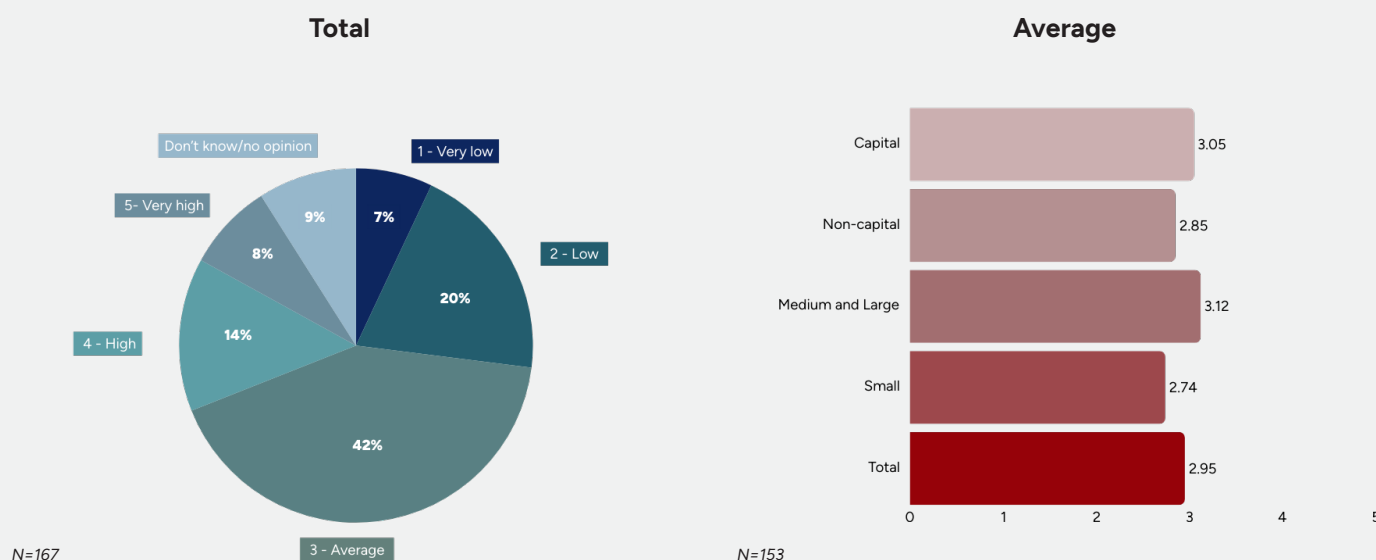
Source: Survey by author.

tailored approaches to reach beyond easily accessible organizations. At least at the level of public communication, EU institutions recognize this objective; as noted, they have committed themselves to engaging 2,500 CSOs, particularly grassroots organizations. This commitment is reinforced by efforts to enhance regranteeing schemes and to create more inclusive local participation spaces, as outlined in Recovery, Resilience, and Reform: Post-2020 Eastern Partnership Priorities.

Interviews with EU and platform representatives confirm this commitment, with public communication and projects increasingly targeting rural and small urban areas. For example, an EU-funded project in Moldova aims to double the number of members in the EaP CSF national platform by 2026 by building awareness and capacity in such localities. Nevertheless, major platforms like the EaP CsF and the bilateral Civil Society Platforms lack formal indicators or obligations to ensure inclusivity beyond their internal goals. The European Commission grant for the EaP CsF, for instance, does not include specific inclusivity indicators, though the platform states that it tracks such metrics in its membership database. In the survey, 42% of responding CSOs rated the dialogue's transparency and inclusiveness as average, 27% as low or very low, and 22% as high or very high. (Figure 6.) Here too, the average rating among capital-based CSOs was slightly higher than among non-capital-based ones, and among medium-to-large CSOs compared to among small ones. There were no major differences between the CSOs from Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine on this question, although CSOs from Moldova tended to rate the process slightly lower compared to those in Georgia and Ukraine.

Figure 6. CSOs' Rating of the Transparency and Inclusiveness of the Dialogue With the EU.

How would you rate the transparency and inclusiveness of the consultation process between your country's CSOs and the EU regarding your country's accession? (From 1 = very low to 5 = very high.)



Source: Survey by author.

For a More Inclusive, Transparent, and Impactful Dialogue

Improving the EU-CSO dialogue is crucial for ensuring that CSOs in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine contribute meaningfully to EU policies, advance reforms, and support the EU accession process. Strengthening the dialogue mechanisms requires enhancing their key characteristics such as sustainability, transparency, and awareness, broadening participation and diversifying membership, and ensuring meaningful engagement through a clearer understanding of how CSO inputs are used. As civil society evolves across the EaP countries, these dialogue mechanisms must adapt by engaging a broader spectrum of actors, including grassroots organizations, informal civic groups, and organizations operating in rural or marginalized areas. Expanding participation is essential to making the dialogue more representative and impactful. Despite existing efforts, significant barriers persist. Many CSOs, especially smaller or periphery-based ones, struggle to access these consultation mechanisms due to limited awareness, logistical challenges, or perceptions of the process as overly formal and ineffective. Further institutionalizing the dialogue, establishing follow-up mechanisms, and clearly communicating the value of CSOs' input are essential to ensuring sustained engagement, to improving CSOs' understanding of their role, and to fostering long-term participation. Additionally, thematic discussions should cover a broader range of issues so as to ensure wider participation. Another challenge is the overlapping and fragmented nature of the dialogue mechanisms. While the EaP CsF, the bilateral Civil Society Platforms, and other CSO coalitions provide numerous engagement opportunities, limited coordination among them weakens the dialogue. This issue is also evident within the mechanisms, where there is significant overlap in membership, either due to limited capacity for coordination and insufficient resources, or because of competition for the same projects and opportunities. Although progress has been made and the EU is taking positive steps to strengthen its relationship with CSOs, shortcomings remain in making the dialogue more sustainable, transparent, and inclusive, as well as in addressing existing imbalances.

The effectiveness of EU-CSO dialogue mechanisms would benefit from a closer evaluation of the current mechanisms and the EU's general capacity to engage with CSOs in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Currently, there are few public assessments of the dialogue, particularly regarding awareness, participation, and the diversity of perspectives included. The EaP CsF and the bilateral Civil Society Platforms provide insufficient data on these aspects, and neither do the European Commission or the EU delegations, despite tracking some of this data. There is even less information about the informal consultation channels and how they manage to ensure broad participation. In addition, limited attention has been given to analyzing the representation of different types of CSOs, their geographical distribution, the locations of consultations, or the specific capacity needs of the CSOs involved. This is despite the EU making engaging a more diverse range of CSOs a key objective. A clearer picture of these aspects would help refine the dialogue and ensure it reaches a broader spectrum of civil society. At a minimum, publishing centralized and easily accessible data on participation, fund disbursement, types of consultations, and the diversity of engaged CSOs, including a breakdown of their characteristics, would offer valuable insights to the EU institutions, CSOs, and the public. Transparency in these areas would support efforts to improve engagement and ensure that dialogue mechanisms remain accessible. As civil society becomes more

diverse, expanding the dialogue beyond well-established, capital-based CSOs is necessary to further strengthen its impact.

The sustainability of the current mechanisms and of the EU-CSO dialogue overall remains a key challenge, particularly given the precarious state of civil society in the three countries. This is especially evident in Georgia, where the government has halted EU accession negotiations despite strong public opposition to this and has passed legislation that can virtually shut down the civic sector. Potential political shifts in Moldova following the parliamentary elections in September and ongoing uncertainties in Ukraine further underscore the need for continued EU investment in maintaining and expanding these dialogue mechanisms. Mechanisms such as the EaP CsF and bilateral Civil Society Platforms can continue to play a crucial role in supporting the EU-CSO dialogue and the EU integration process. However, they require a clearer vision, greater institutional support, and more sustainable funding. Strengthening them (and other CSOs coalitions) should involve setting new objectives, including improving their organizational structures, enhancing transparency, diversifying membership, and expanding their scope of activities with well-defined roles and responsibilities. Operating in survival mode with limited resources, and relying largely on the voluntary efforts of members or the support of better-funded CSOs, these mechanisms have nevertheless managed to exert their influence in the dialogue with the EU. However, this dependence has limited their capacity to grow, to engage with more CSOs, and to address a broader range of themes. A long-term vision is now essential for their sustainability and for the overall dialogue, and through this to ensure they remain effective and capable of meaningfully contributing to the dialogue and the integration process.

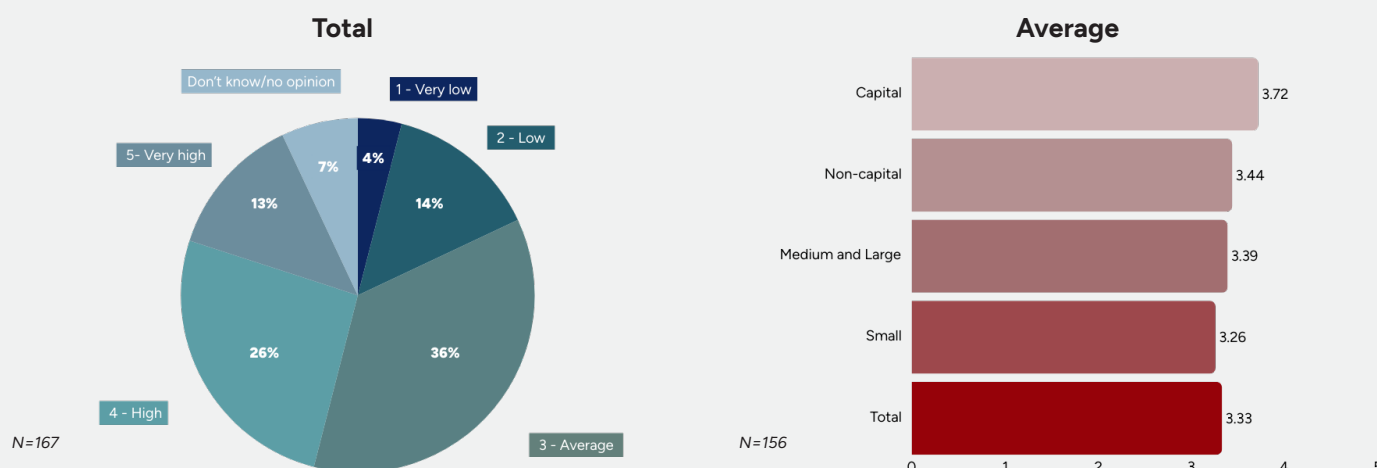
Beyond these mechanisms, there is a broader need to continue and to expand capacity-building efforts for CSOs while diversifying the forms of support available. Although EU assistance to civil society in the EaP countries is increasing, gaps remain, particularly in reaching smaller, non-capital-based CSOs that operate in more challenging environments, including where pro-EU sentiment may be weaker. Expanding support to these CSOs presents additional challenges, but it is essential for fostering a more inclusive dialogue. This need has become even more pressing given the ending of US democracy assistance by the Trump administration.

The survey data suggests that, while EU financial and technical capacity-building support for enhancing their ability to participate in the dialogue is generally well regarded by CSOs, there is room for improvement in the long run. Among responding CSOs, 39% rated it as high or very high, 36% as average, and 18% as low or very low. (Figure 7.) The average ratings among medium-to-large and small CSOs were quite similar, as were those among capital-based and non-capital-based ones. Georgian CSOs perceived EU support slightly more favorably than did their counterparts in Moldova and Ukraine, here too a result likely influenced by the wave of pro-EU protests against the country's government since October 2024.

The gradual integration of CSOs and CSO platforms into the dialogue with the EU and the EaP architecture must continue and be strengthened. In recent years, there has been a trend toward greater inclusion of the dialogue mechanisms, particularly the EaP CsF and the bilateral Civil Society Platforms, in the institutional framework of the EU's EaP policy. For instance, the EaP CSF has been invited to deliver speeches at EaP Senior Officials' Meetings and Foreign Ministers' Meetings, with its speaking slot recently extended from three to seven minutes. Additionally, it is now invited to the more informal discussions following some of these meetings. However, it

Figure 7. CSOs' Rating of the EU Capacity-Building Support for Participating in the Dialogue.

How would you rate the support that the EU is providing for capacity-building (financial and non-financial) to your country's CSOs to help enhance their ability to participate effectively in dialogue with the EU institutions and the accession process? (From 1 = very low to 5 = very high.)



Source: Survey by author.

remains excluded from the main proceedings at the EaP summits, participating only in events on the margins. The bilateral Civil Society Platforms under the EESC are also becoming more integrated in its architecture and, more recently, through the Enlargement Candidate Members Initiative. The integration should be further strengthened and expanded to include other CSO platforms and to give them a more participatory role beyond a merely consultative or informative function. To complement this gradual integration, the EU institutions and the platforms should enhance input mechanisms, ensuring that CSOs fully understand their impact on the dialogue and how their contributions shape the EU's EaP policy. Strengthening such mechanisms is essential, and digital technologies can play a key role in increasing transparency, accessibility, and real-time feedback for CSOs, further reinforcing their engagement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

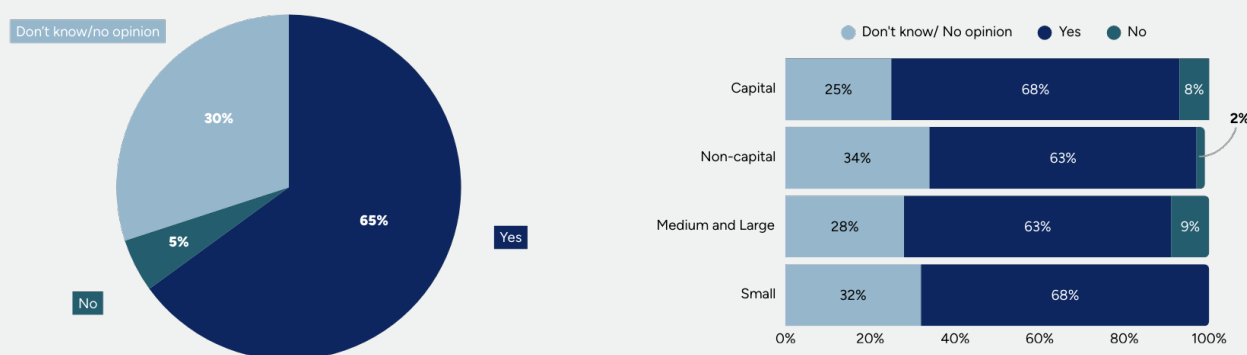
Improving the dialogue mechanisms between the EU and CSOs in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine is essential to keep pace with the evolving civic landscape and the environment in which these CSOs operate. Civil society in these countries is expanding in terms of location, issue focus, and organizational structures. New civic groups are emerging, often focused on single or local issues, some of which were not on the agenda just a few years ago. The format of consultations must adapt to these changes by improving accessibility and inclusion. EU

institutions should make greater efforts to engage a wider spectrum of CSOs, diversify the themes addressed, and decentralize consultations beyond capital cities. Mechanisms such as the EaP CSF need to be made more sustainable, while the bilateral Civil Society Platforms should engage a broader range of CSOs, and other civic associations should be gradually integrated into the dialogue. Additionally, new digital and in-person consultation mechanisms should be developed to ensure that no one is left behind. While EU support is widely acknowledged as essential, there is room for improvement in this regard. In the survey, 65% of responding CSOs said there was a need to enhance consultation mechanisms, while 5% said no changes were necessary (Figure 8.) There were only small differences between capital-based and non-capital-based CSOs or between small and medium-to-large ones. There were no major differences between the CSOs from Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine on this question. The most frequently mentioned suggestions for improving the dialogue included:

- Enhancing inclusivity and representativeness by expanding participation to smaller and grassroots CSOs.
- Improving accessibility through multilingual support and digital tools to facilitate engagement.
- Decentralizing consultations to ensure broader regional participation beyond capital-based organizations.
- Strengthening transparency and feedback mechanisms so CSOs can clearly see how their input is considered.
- Increasing capacity-building efforts and financial support to enable more effective participation.
- Raising awareness about the dialogue process to encourage greater involvement.

Figure 8. CSOs' View of the Need to Improve the Mechanisms for the Dialogue With the EU.

Do you believe there is a need to improve the consultation instruments between CSOs and the EU?
(From 1 = very low to 5 = very high.)



Source: Survey by author. N=167

Prioritizing sustainability and institutional resilience for CSOs and the dialogue mechanisms remains fundamental to the success of EU engagement in the EaP countries. In the current context in these countries, marked by political uncertainty, growing hostility toward independent civil society actors, and unstable funding environments, short-term project support is no longer sufficient. Sustainability must go beyond financing, it should involve building frameworks that ensure predictability, institutional backing, and long-term local ownership. CSOs, particularly those based outside capital cities or operating in politically sensitive contexts, cannot meaningfully engage without consistent resources, protection, and a clearly defined role within the EU integration narrative. The EU, especially through the European Commission and the delegations, must prioritize multi-annual, core funding schemes that allow CSOs and their platforms to maintain continuity and focus on structural reforms. This also requires diversifying funding instruments by offering flexible micro-grants and core operational support that are essential for grassroots and informal initiatives, while reducing bureaucratic barriers and tailoring procedures to the capacities of different groups. Support should not be limited to funding; it must also provide a safety net for CSOs facing crises or political pressure. This is becoming of critical importance especially in Georgia. Professionalizing coordination structures within dialogue mechanisms is equally crucial as relying on overburdened volunteer leadership, as seen at the level of the EaP CsF and the bilateral Civil Society Platforms, hampers efficiency and resilience. Clear mandates, leadership rotation, and performance benchmarks would enhance accountability and operational stability. The EU must also invest in capacity-development programs that are adaptable to shifting political contexts and that will enable CSOs to remain strategically focused even during adversity. Ultimately, trust is the foundation of any sustainable dialogue. Without a fair, transparent, inclusive, and well-resourced framework for participation, civil society's engagement with the EU will weaken.

A persistent flaw in the EU-CSO dialogue is the lack of visibility and understanding of how the process works and why it matters. Although the dialogue mechanisms have gained importance, their accessibility and public profile is limited, especially for newer, smaller, issue-based, or periphery-based CSOs. This is compounded by a lack of clarity on how civil society's input is used or why its participation is meaningful. Many CSOs either do not know how to engage or struggle to understand the practical pathways for contributing. The EU, its delegations in particular, must prioritize targeted awareness-raising efforts at the national and local levels that use clear language and diverse communication channels. These efforts should focus on how to participate and why participation is impactful. Regular publication of consultation opportunities, outcomes, and feedback reports, as well as thematic summaries of how input has influenced policy, would greatly improve transparency and incentivize involvement. Public communication campaigns, ideally co-designed with local civil society actors, should promote the value of EU consultations and demonstrate their policy relevance. Simplifying procedures and reducing technical or bureaucratic barriers would also make the dialogue platforms more accessible, particularly for small or informal CSOs. The EU delegations should take a more active role in organizing consultations beyond capital cities and mostly with influential CSOs by conducting outreach missions and mapping underrepresented CSOs, especially those in conflict-affected, sub-urban and rural, or marginalized communities. Without making the dialogue process more visible, understandable, and user-friendly, even the most inclusive mechanisms risk remaining inaccessible to many.

Ensuring inclusiveness and representativeness is a pressing challenge for EU-supported mechanisms and the CSO dialogue overall. The fact that many platforms are dominated by large, capital-based organizations, while smaller,

grassroots, or regional actors are underrepresented, not only hampers the dialogue but also limits its effectiveness and legitimacy. The EU must take steps to broaden participation. Consultations should be designed to include quotas or participation targets for non-capital-based CSOs, thematically underrepresented groups, and youth-led or informal initiatives. Financial and logistical support is equally important: travel reimbursements, interpretation services, and tailored capacity-building efforts must be integral parts of the process. Consultations should be organized in a variety of locations, not just in capital cities, to make participation geographically inclusive. At the same time, CSO platforms must adopt ways for regularly reviewing and diversifying their membership, rotating leadership, and issuing open calls for involvement. Engagement should also extend beyond formal CSOs to include civic initiatives, local watchdogs, online groups, and unregistered movements, particularly those working in high-risk or low-trust environments. To better reflect the diversity of civil society, the EU must also ensure that smaller and issue-based organizations, outside capital cities, working with minorities, marginalized communities or on politically sensitive topics are included. These points are substantiated by the survey findings that highlight a clear disparity among CSOs in how the dialogue is understood and accessed. Larger and capital-based organizations are more familiar with the mechanisms, better understand how to engage effectively in them, and perceive their input as more influential in shaping EU policy. In contrast, smaller, grassroots, and periphery-based CSOs often lack the same level of awareness, capacity, and access, leaving them underrepresented in dialogue processes. This risks unbalancing the EU's engagement in favor of larger, more visible actors while sidelining other important local perspectives. An EU policy to systematically support and involve smaller organizations is needed to ensure a more inclusive, balanced, and representative dialogue.

Finally, a comprehensive assessment of the dialogue architecture is needed. This should begin with a thorough review of how the dialogue currently functions to evaluate levels of awareness, knowledge, representativeness, inclusiveness, and the actual needs of civil society actors. The process must clarify the role of each EU institution, starting with the EU delegations, and how CSO participation feeds into policymaking and what follow-up steps are taken after consultations. There is also a need for gradual further structured integration of CSOs into the broader EaP framework, with better alignment and coordination among platforms and between key EU actors, particularly the delegations, the European Commission, and the EESC. The EU delegations must become proactive facilitators and supporters of civil society engagement. Their responsibilities should expand and include mapping local actors; diversifying participation; publishing following-up on consultations, results and feedback; and ensuring that CSOs have a better understanding of how their participation in the dialogue works. Transparency should be significantly improved: the EU should publish regular engagement reports, disclose how recommendations were used (or not) and why, and make participation metrics publicly accessible. Reforming the architecture is not only essential for efficiency; it is a prerequisite for building trust and enabling meaningful and sustained participation in the EU accession process.

Endnotes

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