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The Changing Landscape of Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership

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Summary

There is a gap in how civil society is conceptualized and understood by international donors and how the civic landscape has evolved in recent years in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Conventional Western-centered understandings of civil society are increasingly questioned in the face of the emergence of new civic dynamics in the region and globally. CSOs are criticized as professionalized elite organizations that became detached from broader society, while new civic actors and processes have emerged in the six countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), reflecting a broader global trend. In order to address this weakness, the net for understanding and engaging with civil society needs to be cast much wider to include, among others, protest movements, illiberal actors, and organizations that act as proxies for political parties.

A variety of new civic actors are emerging alongside still vibrant older organizations. They are more closely tied to local issues, better connected to communities outside large cities, and frequently focus less on “political” issues such as human rights and democracy, thus expanding the range of topics in which civil society engages. These new actors tend to be less institutionalized than the CSOs that have grown since the 1990s and they work in a more fluid fashion.

In this fluid context, some gaps have also become visible. One feature that is seen throughout the EaP countries is a perceived gap between professionalized CSOs and grassroots civic activism, which can somewhat fragment the impact of civil society. Another feature is that civic space in the EaP countries has become more competitive due to the presence of illiberal, nationalist, or far-right actors. These also often promote a misogynist, xenophobic and, anti-LGBTIQ

rights agenda, and their activities have made political and online violence against other civic actors a more salient issue.

The emergence of new issues, or a renewed focus on older ones—from the environment to social justice, from domestic violence to disability rights—is enabled by new methods for mobilization derived from new technologies. For example, crowdfunding is increasingly used to keep civic actors sustainable and autonomous, while new communications tools have made social protest more common.

Initiatives such as the EaP acknowledge the need for civil society involvement in their activities and in implementing policies. In light of this evolving civic landscape, donors need to widen their view on what civil society “is” in order to improve their engagement. Not only will this help them to understand local contexts better and improve evidence-based decision-making, it will also enhance the flexibility needed to address the ever-changing civic space.

Donors need to improve their presence and connectedness with civil society in the field to be able to engage with how civic actors adapt to changing circumstances. At the same time, the work carried out by professionalized CSOs along the more traditional lines of human rights and democracy promotion remains vital in all of the EaP countries. New and old civic actors alike are at risk of repression and/or political violence because of insufficiently consolidated democratic institutions and practices. Furthermore, some instances of societal mobilization around less overtly political themes can turn into large-scale political protests with deep transformative potential, such as Armenia.

Introduction

In the 1990s, against the background of the transitions in post-communist and post-Soviet countries, funding by international donors to civil society organizations (CSOs) increased significantly. This was based on the assumption that civil society is central in fostering democratization and demanding responsible government. The European Union initially focused mostly on Central Europe, but from the 2000s onwards it expanded its reach to Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus with the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004. This was later complemented by the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, which involves Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Today, the CSO environment that resulted has become the subject of criticism as professionalized elite organizations became detached from broader society,¹ and new civic actors and processes have emerged in these countries, reflecting a broader global trend.

Conventional Western-centered understandings of civil society are increasingly questioned in the face of the emergence of new civic dynamics in Eastern Europe and globally. In fact, some of the allegedly new civic actors have merely flown under the radar of the standard conceptualization of civil society. In order to address this weakness, the net for understanding and engaging with civil society needs to be cast much wider to include, among others, protest movements, illiberal actors, and organizations that act as proxies for political parties. This enables a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the civic landscape

in the EaP countries and provides policymakers with a better understanding of regional dynamics.

Understanding Civic Actors

Since Alexis de Tocqueville's classic study of state-society relations in American society in the 19th century, civil society has been understood as a diversity of social organizations pressuring the state to consider their demands and to exercise power responsibly.² These groups, coalescing around issues that cut across the boundaries of primordial attachments, are assumed to have beneficial effects for democracy.³ Western policies aimed at supporting the "waves" of democratization since the 1980s, including the transitions in Eastern Europe, have been informed by this conceptualization of civil society. The implicit flip side of the assumption that civil society is key to democracy has been the exclusion of groups that did not subscribe to progressive, liberal, or democratic goals, such as the nationalist right, some conservative movements, or groups without any clear ideology.⁴ In the 2000s, the possible distinction between civil and uncivil society started gaining attention. Different experts argued that the features of uncivil society include the use of violence⁵ and undemocratic organizational forms.⁶

1 Armine Ishkanian, *Self-Determined Citizens? New Forms of Civic Activism and Citizenship in Armenia*, *Europe Asia Studies*, October 2014; S.L. Henderson, *Building Democracy in Contemporary Russia: Western Support for Grassroots Organizations*, Cornell University Press, 2003; D. M. Abramson, "A Critical Look at NGOs and Civil Society as Means to an End in Uzbekistan", *Human Organization*, fall 1999.; Katerina Pishchikova, *Promoting Democracy in Postcommunist Ukraine: The Contradictory Outcomes of US Aid to Women's NGOs*, FirstForum-Press, 2011; S.E. Mendelson and J.K. Glenn (eds.), *The Power and Limits of NGOs: A Critical Look at Building Democracy in Eastern Europe*, Columbia University Press, 2002.

2 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, G. Dearborn and Co., 1838; Brian Pratt (ed.), *Changing Expectations?: The Concept and Practice of Civil Society in International Development*, INTRAC, 2003; Axel Hadenius and Fredrik Uggla, "Shaping Civil Society," in Amanda Bernard, Henny Helmich, and Percy B. Lehning (eds.), *Civil Society and International Development*, North-South Centre of the Council of Europe: Development Centre of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1998; Larry Diamond, *Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation*, *Journal of Democracy*, July 1994.

3 R.D. Putnam, "What Makes Democracy Work?," *National Civic Review*, spring 1993.

4 Richard Youngs, *Civic Activism Unleashed: New Hope or False Dawn for Democracy?*, Oxford University Press, 2019; Richard Youngs, "[What Sets a New Generation of Civic Activists Apart?](#)," Carnegie, 2019.

5 For example: Leigh A. Payne, *Uncivil Movements. The Armed Right Wing and Democracy in Latin America*, John Hopkins University Press, 2000.

6 For example, Laurence Whitehead, "Bowling in the Bronx: The Uncivil Interstices between Civil and Political Society", *Democratization*, 1997.

However, the attempt to make strict distinctions between the two was also called into question.⁷

In Eastern Europe, the challenges of civic activism, the rise in importance of conservative and far-right groups, the ubiquity of government-sponsored CSOs, and the often blurred relationship between civil society and the state have become more pressing in the last decade. Social movements have become important features of civic space. These have a broader base, adopt “fluid new forms of civic organization,” and include “individual activists, and local communities’ bodies.”⁸ Non-institutionalized forms of activity such as protests, diaspora activities, internet activism, and local initiatives are vital parts of civic space in the region. Yet these groups are hard to classify: for example, some movements may develop more formal organizational features while some CSOs may be engaged in protest movements.⁹ Conservative and far-right activists, as well as churches and associated religious groups, became more prominent, mostly by positioning themselves against a “liberal-progressive elite that includes most of the formal NGO sector.”¹⁰ These groups are part of the civic space without falling under the conventional Western-centered definition of liberal, progressive civil society actors.

Conceptualizing the relationship between state and civil society also requires some adaptation. Civil society has long been considered as a force contesting and restricting the role of the state and curbing its access to abusive power. This understanding of civil society actors as government watchdogs is widely

shared among donors supporting the sector across the EaP countries.¹¹ Yet, the dynamics of state-civil society relations in the region show a more complex picture. First, understanding civil society as opposition is challenged by the rise of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), as well as groups which represent governmental interests. The groups, however, are not always in conflict with liberal democratic groups, and even when they are, they are part of civic space, meaning they cannot be excluded from any analysis.¹²

Social movements have become important features of civic space.

A strict definition of independent civic actors as opposed to GONGOs becomes difficult also because the former frequently rely on working relationships with the government and/or can be perceived as such even when they maintain their independence. For instance, some civic actors provide expertise and information to governments without supporting their political agenda. Moreover, especially in rural areas, less antagonistic relationships between civic actors and governments are common and often vital. Western-style CSOs are largely absent in rural areas, leaving civic actors to work on a small scale within local communities and neighborhoods on identifying solutions to citizen concerns.¹³ This type of activity is often carried out in cooperation with local authorities. The definition of CSOs thus needs to encompass those

7 Petr Kopecký and Cas Mudde (eds.), *Uncivil Society? Contentious Politics in Post-Communist Europe*, Routledge, 2003.

8 Richard Youngs, *Global Civic Activism in Flux*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017; J.Y. Paturyan, and Valentina Gevorgyan, *Civic Activism as a Novel Component of Armenian Civil Society*, Turpanjian Center for Policy Analysis, American University of Armenia, 2016.

9 Tamar Jakeli, “Beyond ‘Co-Opted NGOs’ and ‘Radical Grassroots Movements’: Women’s Mobilization in Georgia”, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, July 2018; K.M. Guenther, “The Possibilities and Pitfalls of NGO Feminism: Insights from Postsocialist Eastern Europe”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, summer 2011.

10 Youngs, *Civic Activism Unleashed*.

11 Aron Buzogány, “Civil Society Organisations Beyond the European Union: Normative Expectations and Local Realities”, *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, June 2018; Natalia Shapovalova and Richard Youngs, “The Changing Nature of EU Support to Civil Society,” in Timm Beichelt, Irene Hahn-Fuhr, Frank Schimmelfennig, and Susan Worschech (eds.), *Civil Society and Democracy Promotion*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.; Annette Jünemann, and Michèle Knodt (eds.), *Externe Demokratieförderung durch die Europäische Union (European External Democracy Promotion)*, Nomos, 2007.

12 Reza Hasmath, Timothy Hildebrandt, and Jennifer Hsu, “Conceptualizing Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations,” *Journal of Civil Society*, July 2019.

13 Youngs, *Civic Activism Unleashed*.

organizations that regularly work and engage with institutions.

Finally, while civil society is often confused with a space for CSOs,¹⁴ in many cases these exist only on paper or civic sector is dominated by Western-supported professionalized and elite CSOs. Conversely, civic activism is far more vibrant outside these organizations.¹⁵ This gap between civic activism and professionalized organizations has in recent years become a recurrent theme across the globe.

These developments cast doubt over the certainty, until about a decade ago, about what types of organization most typically constitute civil society.¹⁶ That certainty was probably shaped by the optimism over the direction of travel of the transitions and democratization waves that marked the narratives about the end of the Cold War. Many of the actors that have now come into focus are neither new nor have they only recently become part of civic space. Illiberal activism, church groups, protests, kinship volunteering, and local initiatives have long featured in the EaP but were not considered part of civil society.¹⁷ Similarly, while internet activism is a form that can be understood as

new,¹⁸ the activists involved are not necessarily so. The roles and impacts of these actors need to be analyzed with a broader conceptualization of civic actors and by looking at their specific contexts.

The Space for Civil Society

The six countries in the Eastern Partnership share some post-Soviet traits but also have plenty of respective specificities. Some issues visible across the region, such as the closing space and the gap between urban and rural areas, are reflective of global trends rather than any particular legacy.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, most of Eastern Europe embarked on a “triple transition” to pluralist democracy, market economy, and fully independent statehood.¹⁹ Civil society too has been shaped by these complex factors: the nature of the transitions, the development of independence movements that steered political change, the degree of conflict, and the relationships not just with Russia but also with Turkey and Western Europe. Emigration and demography, the role of religion, and the relationships between capital cities and the countryside are also themes that run through the six countries, albeit in different ways.

Except in Belarus, the transitions in the EaP countries have been complicated by conflicts that remain ongoing. The conflict in Moldova between the pro-Western, Romanian-speaking part of the country and pro-Russian Transnistria splits citizens across geographic and linguistic lines. Georgia has over 20 percent of its territory under occupation as result of the civil war and the Russian-supported secessionist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the 1990s, as well as the 2008 war with Russia. Armenia and Azerbaijan are locked in conflict over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Ukraine, which had avoided conflict and occupation after gaining inde-

14 For example, Marc Morjé Howard, “The Weakness of Postcommunist Civil Society,” *Journal of Democracy*, January 2002.

15 Huseyn Aliyev, “Civil Society in the South Caucasus: Kinship Networks as Obstacles to Civil Participation,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, May 2014; Nelson Kasfir (ed.), *Civil Society and Democracy in Africa: Critical Perspectives*, Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1999; Lindsey Whitfield, “Civil Society as Idea and Civil Society as Process: The Case of Ghana,” *Oxford Development Studies*, 2003; P.F. Sedogo, “Civil Society in Sub-Saharan Africa: How Can Western Countries Help Civil Society in Africa?,” in Amanda Bernard, Henny Helmich, and Percy B. Lehning (eds.), *Civil Society and International Development*, North-South Centre of the Council of Europe: Development Centre of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1998; Daniel T. Osabu-Kle, *Compatible Cultural Democracy: The Key to Development in Africa*, University of Toronto Press, 2000; Claude Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa*, Brookings Institution, 1996.

16 Youngs, *Civic Activism Unleashed*.

17 Kerstin Jacobsson and Elżbieta Korolczuk, “Introduction: Rethinking Polish Civil Society,” in Kerstin Jacobsson and Elżbieta Korolczuk (eds.), *Civil Society Revisited: Lessons from Poland*, Berghahn Books, 2017.

18 See Youngs, *Civic Activism Unleashed: New Hope or False Dawn for Democracy?* for a discussion of changing tactics, structure, and rationale of internet activism.

19 Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries, *A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change*, Routledge, 1998.

pendence, saw its sovereignty severely challenged by Russia's annexation of Crimea and military invasion of the Donbas region since 2014.

These protracted conflicts affect the civil society landscape and the activities of CSOs, yet only in Ukraine is there a public debate about the conflict with Russia. In Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova, the conflicts are rarely discussed publicly, and only a minority of CSOs are engaged in addressing the problems they create through activities such as through people-to-people contacts.

The revolutions in some of the EaP countries have ushered in much change, but also widespread disenchantment as reform promises went unfulfilled. Fear of such revolutions has also influenced Russia's policy toward its neighbors and been used to justify its interference in the politics of these countries.

The global phenomenon of the closing space for civil society has been felt across the region.

The path to independence and the role civil society played in it also varied across the six EaP countries. Whereas following the break-up of the Soviet Union, a strong national identity struggled to assert itself and resonated with a minority of citizens in Belarus and Ukraine, in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova civil society was shaped by the movements for national independence and the beginning of post-Soviet transition. The wars in the region have also played a key role in building national identity.

The degree of enduring authoritarianism and of incipient democratization defined civil society's development. Azerbaijan and Belarus have continuously been under authoritarian rule since independence. The alternation of crackdowns with periods of relaxation, depending on outside pressure and domestic dynamics (as when the regime in Belarus released some political prisoners when seeking to improve its dialogue with the EU), has been of consequence to the strategies for survival of civil society, many of whose representatives are still in jail. These authoritarian

regimes have also adopted a wide range of strategies to curb civil society and camouflage repression, from legal restrictions and harassment tactics to financing NGOs close to the government. Until the eruption of the mass protests following the rigged presidential election of August 9, 2020, protest movements in Belarus were swiftly repressed, while in Azerbaijan the opposition has been mostly driven underground.

The other four countries have experienced to varying degrees civic activism, mass mobilization, and revolution that ushered in new generations of civil society actors. Their respective histories of political change have meant great fluctuation in the space for civil society to occupy. Georgia inaugurated in 2003 the season of "color revolutions." Its Rose Revolution started the country's democratic transition. Ukraine experienced revolutions in 2004 and 2013–2014 that were defining events for the development of civil society and for political change. Euromaidan, the war in Donbas, and the mobilization of society to support efforts against Russian aggression played a key role in shaping today's civic landscape. But they have also led to widespread "burn-out" and exhaustion among activists following months of active and continuous engagement, as well as disillusionment about the political class's ability to reform the country and fight the corruption that had mobilized so much public opinion. On the other hand, in Armenia the crackdown on post-election protests in 2008 helped create an opposition movement and bottom-up civic activism that eventually culminated in the Velvet Revolution of 2017, which brought in the beginnings of a new democracy.

The global phenomenon of the closing space for civil society has been felt across the region too. Following the Kremlin's playbook, the governments of Azerbaijan and Belarus have made ample use of a range of restrictive legal measures, curbing the ability of CSOs to receive funding. Many activists have fled abroad. The efforts to close the space for civil society use direct and indirect tools. The direct ones include legislation designed to block foreign funding or curb the activities of CSOs; legal prosecution of indi-

Table 1. Trust in Institutions

	Armenia (2017)	Azerbaijan (2013)	Belarus (2015)	Georgia (2019)	Moldova (2019)	Ukraine (2018-19)
CSOs / NGOs	24%	21%		20%	18%	45% (2018)
Government			21%		15%	9% (2019)
Executive Government	20%	56%		20%		
Local Government	34%	40%	16%	27%		
Army	77%	86%	39%	74%	32%	71% (2019)
Parliament	12%	56%	12%	16%	11%	
Media	22%	40%	(nonstate) 24% (state) 34%	20%	32%	
Religious Institutions	75%	57%	46%	70%	71%	65% (2019)

Source: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia: Caucasus Research Resource Centers, [Caucasus Barometer, Datasets](#); Belarus: [Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies](#); Moldova: Institutul de Polici Publice, [Public Opinion Barometer](#); Ukraine: Pact, [Public Opinion Survey to Assess Changes in Citizens' Awareness of Civil Society and Their Activities](#).

vidual activists accused of being traitors or foreign agents; legislation curbing the freedom of expression, assembly or association; and direct repression of dissent through imprisonment. Other tools—such as smear campaigns, harassment, and threats—are also increasingly used not just by governments, but also their proxies or other societal actors.²⁰

The extent of the post-Soviet legacy in the EaP countries is a recurring theme. While hard to define as a sociological concept, it is frequently referred to when explaining the relationship between civil society, non-governmental organizations, opposition activists, and society at large. Frequently, activists interviewed speak about citizens' "apathy," a homo Sovieticus fatalistic and distrustful of others, a generalized belief that individual activism cannot shape events, nostalgia for

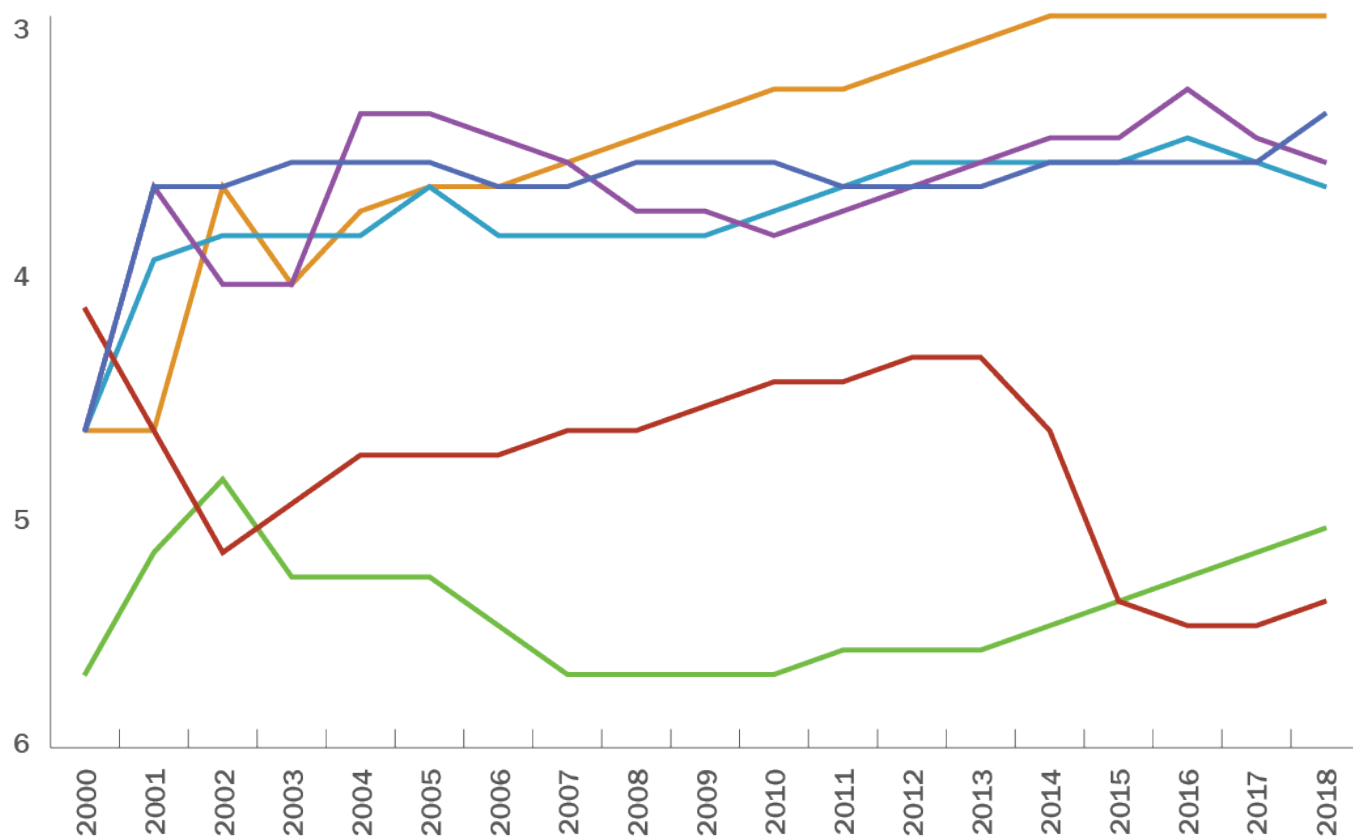
the Soviet Union among people born in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the belief that receiving funding is "shameful."

Civil society is still distrusted in society at large in most of the EaP countries. Surveys of public opinion show that large majorities do not place their trust in CSOs, in sharp contrast with the trust many place in the army and in religious institutions (see Table 1). The exception is Ukraine where the picture is very different: in 2018, 45 percent of people surveyed said they had trust in CSOs, 40 percent in individual or informal activists, and 60 percent in volunteers and volunteer organizations.²¹

The USAID annual assessment of civil society sustainability in the region shows that in recent years, when it comes to the "public image" dimension of civil society, there has been either slight but clear improve-

20 Thomas Carothers, "Closing Space for International Democracy and Human Rights Support," *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, August 2016.

21 Pact Inc., *Public Opinion Survey to Assess the Changes in Citizen's Awareness of Civil Society and their Activities 2015-2018, 2018*.

Figure 1. 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

ment in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine, or an unstable mix of gains and retreats in Moldova. Only Azerbaijan shows a clear deterioration. (See Figure 1.)

Russia is one of the most important external actors in the EaP countries. Much of its foreign policy toward the region has been focused on countering political reform and “color revolutions” there, viewing them as a direct threat to its own authoritarian regime and international clout. Russia exerts its influence in these countries through a varying mix of hard power (occupations and support for separatist groups) and informally through, for example, Russian-language media

and people-to-people contacts. Russian repression has become a playbook for authoritarian leaders elsewhere pursuing policies that restrict civil society activity and persecute dissent. Turkey has also been influential in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

A Fluid Environment of New and Old Actors

The civic actors that have been emerging in the Eastern Partnership countries during the past decade are more “fluid” in nature and reflect citizen movements with a broader base compared to the CSOs that led change in the early 2000s. In Armenia, Georgia, and

Ukraine, revolution and political change brought on new waves of activism. In the past, post-revolutionary periods were followed by periods in which civil society retreated from the political landscape, as in Georgia and Ukraine after the Rose and Orange Revolutions of 2003 and 2004. Widespread disillusionment with new governments nourished further mobilization in both countries through revolution and protest.

In Ukraine, the Euromaidan and the experience of war in Donbas played a key role in mobilizing society, including individuals who had never been active. Despite the burnout many activists and volunteers in the east of the country felt after mobilizing from 2014 onwards against the Russian threat, the lesson of the aftermath of the Orange Revolution was to continue pursuing civic engagement. The year 2014 saw a record surge in volunteerism. Before Euromaidan 14 percent of Ukrainians engaged in volunteering, but during and after the revolution that number rose to 23 percent. No less than 70 percent of those activities were directed toward helping the military and in 2014 roughly 32.5 percent of Ukrainians donated money to support the armed forces.²² Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution had its roots in the protest movements of 2008–2011. Civic activism saw a boom between 2011 and 2017 with influential movements such as Occupy Mashtots Park and Electric Yerevan mobilizing citizens over urban and environmental issues and electricity costs.

During this period, some generational change became evident by comparison to the CSOs and their leaders who were prominent in the transition periods, in some cases with a strong engagement of student movements, such as in Armenia. In Azerbaijan, it is primarily younger people who are engaged in spontaneous “art gardens” and “social cafés” in which activists present ideas and exhibitions. Not all countries have seen such regeneration. In Moldova, it was noted that

protestors, including for the Occupy Guguta protests in 2018, varied in age.

Far-right organizations have mushroomed across the EaP countries. They share a deeply anti-liberal, anti-globalist, and ethno-nationalist ideology with a strong emphasis on traditional values such as defending the family. They differ in their degree of radicalism, though. Most ethno-nationalist groups look toward the European far right for ideological partners, such as Germany's Alternative für Deutschland. Indeed, there is now an Alternative for Georgia group. Many far-right nationalist groups are thus not necessarily close to Russia, although their anti-liberal and anti-globalist ideology makes them close to the Kremlin's social-conservative propaganda, and there are frequent and widely believed rumors of Russian funding to some of these groups. Explicitly pro-Russian organizations and parties also exist, such as the Alliance for Patriots in Georgia.

Most interviewees in the EaP countries said they did not fear the rise of far-right groups.

War, conflict, and security threats fuel these movements. In Ukraine, far-right paramilitary groups offer training, recruiting among the young and contributing to a growing “industry of far right thuggery.”²³ But they are active outside the main political arena, and failed to enter the parliament in 2019 except for one seat. Far-right groups in Ukraine have small membership but a high potential for mobilization.²⁴ They enjoy media coverage and are able to carry out smear campaigns against individuals.

Most interviewees in the EaP countries said they did not fear the rise of far-right groups. These nonetheless

22 Kateryna Zarembo, “Substituting for the State: The Role of Volunteers in Defense Reform in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine,” *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal*, December 2017.

23 April Gordon, *A New Eurasian Far Right Rising: Reflections on Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia*, Freedom House Special Report, January 2020.

24 Volodymyr Ishchenko, “Far Right Participation in the Ukrainian Maidan Protests: An Attempt of Systematic Estimation,” *European Politics and Society*, March 15, 2016.

represent a threat to minorities, especially Roma, and to LGBTIQ activists, and they use violence as their main means of action, attacking parades and headquarters of activists. There are frequent occurrences of political violence against civic activists committed by far-right groups, in particular against LGBTIQ activists, women, and ethnic-minorities ones. This often is not condemned by the authorities. Alongside episodes of police brutality in dispersing protesting crowds (for instance, in Georgia since the summer of 2019), there are notable cases of impunity for the murder of activists even when enough evidence for trial was available, such as the notorious case of Kateryna Hanzhuk in Ukraine. The lack of strong law-enforcement bodies and institutions gives impunity to the perpetrators and inciters of political violence. This reflects insufficient reform of the security sector and poor law enforcement, a challenge that exists throughout the region.

The rise of new, often grassroots and community-based, actors highlights a growing gap within civil society.

Religion plays an important role in society and churches are very influential in all the EaP countries. The Moscow Patriarchate has great influence on the Orthodox churches in the region, except in Ukraine whose churches were granted autocephaly in 2018. Furthermore, church and state are quite intertwined. In Azerbaijan, alongside the religious authorities, grassroots religious charities also play a role. Churches are the most trusted institutions in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, where the levels of trust in state institutions are low.²⁵ In many cases, the rise of far-right, socially conservative groups is supported by churches. For instance, in Georgia the extremely influential church tacitly supports far-right groups where there is

convergence on the anti-liberal and pro-family-values agenda.

Diasporas have played different roles in the EaP countries. The Moldovan diaspora is largely pro-European and is so large that it can play a role in electoral politics; for example, it was particularly active in protesting about insufficient access to polling stations abroad. The Armenian and Azerbaijani diasporas have a strong historical role in supporting civil society mostly through charity work and community support. In Azerbaijan, Muslim communities have strong grassroots charity networks, supported also by external actors such as Iran or the Gulf states.

The rise of new, often grassroots and community-based, actors to an extent highlights a growing gap within civil society. They frequently represent generational change and new forms of mobilization on a broader variety of issues believed to be closer to society's demands. There is also a degree of antipathy between what are seen as elite, professionalized, and Western-oriented CSOs and more "genuine," grassroots ones. Donor-driven, capital-based CSOs, which often cooperate with governments, are perceived by the public and newer actors as "grant eaters" run by well-educated polyglots who "drink coffee and organize conferences at the Radisson Hotel." At times these labels are utilized in smear campaigns against some CSOs, notably anti-corruption ones. These organizations are seen by many as out of touch with society and not dealing with issues the wider public cares about, such as poverty, inequality, pollution, and education.

Related to this is the relationship between CSOs and politics. In Belarus, repression drove anti-authoritarian CSOs into a "democratic ghetto" where they lost touch with society. In Armenia, the previous ruling government had the support of several GONGOs while in power, and these continue to represent its interests in opposition. In Azerbaijan, the government created the Council on State Support to NGOs and other mechanisms that distribute grants to "counter-balance" Western influence, and it attempted to monopolize charity activities through the Heydar

25 EU Neighbours East, [Open Neighbourhood—Communicating for a Stronger Partnership: Connecting with Citizens across the Eastern Neighbourhood](#), Annual Survey Report, Regional Overview, 4th Wave, Spring 2019.

Aliyev Foundation. In Georgia, where organizations can be registered overnight, they are seen as a stepping-stone for individuals who want to join politics. Some of the younger and newer organizations want to distance themselves from the CSOs that gained prominence in the earlier years of the Rose Revolution precisely because some of their representatives went through the “revolving door” in and out of politics.

Distrust of CSOs feeds into other cleavages, notably that between the CSOs mostly based in the capital and other cities and those in the countryside. The gap between urban centers and rural areas, and especially between capital cities and the rest of the country, is a theme common in the EaP countries, and especially in Armenia and Moldova where most CSOs are based in the capital. In Moldova, there has recently been a donor-driven change of focus toward establishing and fostering rural CSOs, even though such processes remain nascent. In Azerbaijan, “community development” programs in rural areas are disappearing and the remaining ones are often dominated by local elites. Here, since the crackdown on CSOs and the retreat of donors, the rural population is at the mercy of local strongmen. In some rural areas where socioeconomic hardship can be exploited by external players, the government approves of CSOs that provide basic services, as long as they do not contradict the government’s agenda.

In Ukraine, civil society is developed and active in the major cities, but its relationship with state institutions varies. Whereas Kyiv-based activists have also been engaged in politics and served in parliament after the Euromaidan, in the regions there has been far less of a revolving door between civil society and politics. Local politics is dominated by regional oligarchs and there is little exchange between local government and CSOs.

In the smaller EaP countries, such as Georgia, civil society is also developed in cities other than the capital and is often part of networks (often with headquarters in Tbilisi). Rural and mountainous communities are more isolated. Even when there is civic activism outside of the capital, meetings and activities are often

organized in regional towns. However, inhabitants of remote villages often do not have access to these activities due to insufficient infrastructure, especially in winter, and/or because of economic rationales, especially for the large part of the rural population who are subsistence farmers.

New Issues: Away from the Political?

Economic, social, or “practical” issues are emerging as key factors for civil society across the Eastern Partnership countries. Low living standards, unemployment, and low salaries are considered as the most pressing issues by citizens.²⁶ These concerns are often expressed in protests; for instance, in Armenia, Moldova, and Ukraine against shortcomings in infrastructure development, pension reforms, or high energy prices. In Armenia and Georgia, educational initiatives are increasingly popular. In Ukraine, new festivals—for example, for the inclusion of disabled people—also engage with primarily social rather than overtly political issues.

These concerns are often narrowly defined and localized. Citizen opposition to urban planning and construction decisions is notable. For example, in Moldova activists occupied a café in a public park in Chisinau that was meant to be demolished after nontransparent procedures. This is mirrored by the Occupy Mashots Park in Armenia, and in Ukraine by Save Old Kiyv and the Green Front, the latter of which opposes the felling of trees in Kharkiv’s Gorky Park. In Georgia, locals protested and clashed with police over the construction of a hydropower plant in the Pankisi Gorge.

Environmental activism has gained traction to varying degrees in the EaP countries. For instance, groups in Armenia have been protesting against the opening of the Amulsar mine and have promoted environmental tourism, and in Belarus they have advocated for animal rights. In Ukraine, groups have mobilized around various environmental issues, including

²⁶ Ibid.

animal rights and cycling. Here again, it is evident that engagement with localized narrow issues dominates even though they can be connected to larger themes. For instance, in Azerbaijan, activism promoting eco-tourism could be perceived as an instrument to promote a broader environmental agenda. In Georgia, recently established environmental CSOs offer legal support and advice to the hydropower protests. Environmental activism is rarer in Moldova where actors focus on other local issues.

Other issues highlight significant societal polarization, especially along the progressive-conservative axis. This is especially visible when it comes to LGBTIQ issues, which are immensely contested between progressive-liberal groups and conservative or extreme right forces. While pride parades and festivals are increasingly organized in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, and at least superficially protected by the authorities, aggressive, often violent opposition to them by far-right and conservative groups, including those connected to churches, continues across the entire EaP. In Belarus, there is hardly any space for pro-LGBTIQ activism, and the Orthodox and Catholic Churches as well as governmental actors promote radically anti-LGBTIQ agendas.

The most noticeable trend across the EaP is that of civic actors moving away from overtly political topics.

Such polarization is also present with regard to women's and children's rights and domestic violence. These issues are becoming increasingly prominent areas of mobilization. For instance, in Azerbaijan, initiatives such as WoWoman gained international and governmental assistance to address concerns such as career-building and business opportunities. In 2019, opposition politician Fuad Qahramanli resigned after domestic violence allegations resulted in a social media campaign against him. In Belarus, activists self-organized when a law on combating domestic violence was, after significant right-wing activism, blocked by the president. At the same time, conserva-

tive and far-right groups strongly oppose pro-women activism. For instance, in Ukraine several "pro-life" or "pro-family" movements have gained momentum, advocating against abortion, contraceptives, education on sexual orientation, and same-sex partnerships. There have been similar developments in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova. While these movements have limited membership, large parts of the population share their views.

The way and extent to which civic actors mobilize around the region's conflicts varies. The conflict in Donbas has significantly shaped civil society in Ukraine, and volunteering was crucial in filling gaps in state capacity related to the security situation. Especially in Armenia and Azerbaijan but also in Ukraine, conflicts have also been utilized to discredit opposition to the government. As a result, civic actors are wary of taking a stance on conflict issues that could be portrayed as "unpatriotic." This avoidance of overt criticism of governments with regard to conflicts reflects adaptations to increasingly limited civic spaces, a general trend that is elaborated on below. There is virtually no public debate on the conflicts in Georgia and Moldova, and only a minority of—often Western-funded—CSOs address the problems created by separatism, primarily through people-to-people contacts and cross-border cooperation.

With activism around "practical" issues becoming increasingly dominant, the most noticeable trend across the EaP is that of civic actors moving away from overtly political topics. While there is still activism on political issues—for example, on constitutional reform in Armenia, on judicial processes in Moldova, or on electoral reform in Georgia—topics that are seemingly apolitical or at least do not neatly map onto political parties' ideologies have increasingly gained traction.

In closing-space contexts, apolitical issues offer some of the few viable alternatives for civil society activism. By focusing on less overtly political topics, civic groups in all EaP countries avoid persecution, smear campaigns, or restrictive measures by the government. Openly political, especially anti-government, actions are particularly rare in rural areas,

where civic actors rely on having working relationships with local authorities in environments where “everyone knows everyone.” At the same time, issues that are related to socioeconomic development are more closely connected to citizens’ concerns than those addressed by many established CSOs. Groups addressing such on-the-ground local concerns can easily connect with a constituency; for example in Ukraine where broken infrastructure is one of the public’s leading concerns, or in Georgia where unemployment is viewed as the most important concern.²⁷

However, while these issues may seem apolitical at first, they can become politicized following the engagement of civil society. It can also be the case sometimes that activism that seems apolitical is motivated by and connects to deeper political issues. For instance, the Occupy Guguta movement in Moldova was originally motivated by frustrations with mayoral elections and corruption. Similarly, Occupy Mashots Park in Armenia can be said to have advanced decentralized decisionmaking within the group that can serve as a template. In Azerbaijan, culture, arts, and science events have become increasingly popular. Here, these are ways to express active citizenship in the context of a repressive regime while also fostering a sense of community. Thus, rather than understanding these forms of engagement as apolitical or discarding them as “only” civic activism, they are a response to closing spaces by providing room for collective action.

How New Methods Influence Civic Spaces?

The increased civic activism in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine is paralleled by the use of new methods of organization, funding, and collaboration. Most urban-based movements have been defined by their informality, volunteer participation or contribution, and horizontal structure. This applies to their general organization as well as to the spontaneous protests they organize. After the Euro-maidan in Ukraine, civic activism has become more

horizontal and diverse, reaching out to diverse social actors. In Moldova, the protests after corruption scandals in 2015 led to spontaneous and broad social protests. In addition, the success of protest movements depends largely on broad social involvement and their capacity to mobilize different social groups. Networks of individual civic activists, CSOs, and experts have been developing since 2013. In Armenia, for instance, during the 2018 revolution already established networks managed to attract the participation of different social groups due to their effective use of digital platforms such as Facebook and Telegram.

In addition, in political contexts with significant restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, digital media have provided the space for independent or pro-opposition outlets. For instance, in Armenia the growth of blogging about political issues began in 2008 during the state of emergency declared after the post-electoral protests.²⁸ This trend continued during the next decade when digital media provided space for social activism, and in many cases the high popularity of some blogging managed to attract the attention of the conventional media. Similarly, in Azerbaijan social media activism, especially on Facebook and YouTube where revenues can cover expenses of activists, has been on the rise. However, various video bloggers became affiliated with political parties, undermining their public credibility, and the scene has become increasingly competitive leading to mutual accusations of bias and corruption.

Several of the EaP countries experienced participatory actions that rely on street-based demonstrations and actions rather than structured participation. This was the case in Moldova with Occupy Guguta and in Armenia before 2018 with Electric Yerevan, the 100-drams protests, Mashtots park, Dem Em (I am against), and “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building”. The strategy of social protest in Armenia in 2018 focused on peaceful, decentralized, and unco-

27 Caucasus Research Resource Center, [Caucasus Barometer 2019 Georgia](#), 2019.

28 Ashot Melikyan, Mesrop Harutyunyan, Artur Papyan, Suren Deheryan, and Martin Ayvazyan, *Mapping Digital Media: Armenia*, Open Society Foundations, November 2013.

ordinated actions, which limited the capacity of the police to respond. The movement was not only limited to the capital but also involved the provinces. In addition, coordinated actions, cooperation, and exchange of experiences has developed between different social actors including youth activists, civil society organizations and media experts. This increases the capacity to influence political decisions, as successful initiatives in Armenia have shown.

Civic initiatives increasingly count for their activities on individual contributions through different crowdsourcing platforms. Crowdsourcing initiatives were developed for monitoring elections in Armenia. In Ukraine, the trust in civic movements after Euromaidan is reflected in increased donations to crowdfunding platforms. The first such platform, Spilnokosht, has collected UAH 19.2 million (about €655,000) from more than 32,000 individual donors for 265 projects since it was established, a year before the Euromaidan protests.

In Moldova, following the implementation in 2017 of a law that allows citizens to donate 2 percent of their income tax to a public association or religious organization, in that first year approximately 16,000 taxpayers donated around €130,803 with 28 percent of that sum going to 247 public associations and 74 percent to 46 religious groups.²⁹ The Occupy Guguta movement fully relied on crowdfunding rather than applying for international grants as a conscious decision to not be perceived as a “grant eater” and remain connected to their constituencies. In Azerbaijan, the crackdown on civil society triggered the perception that alternatives to external grants needed to be developed, and crowdfunding campaigns inspired by those of Alexei Navalny in Russia were launched. Primarily, donations are collected via the Internet from inside Azerbaijan and the diaspora.

The motivation behind this approach to funding by CSOs and civic initiatives is the desire to posi-

tion their activities closer to the grassroots, rather than to political parties or international donors and aid implementer organizations, which are sometimes distrusted by independent activists and the public. Hierarchical structures are not trusted by all activists of the most horizontal movements such as the students or youth movements, which leads such movements to adopt more flexible and spontaneous organizational strategies.

Civic initiatives increasingly count for their activities on individual contributions through different crowdsourcing platforms.

Social entrepreneurship has become more prevalent as well in the EaP countries. In Ukraine particularly, volunteering and donations have increased, with more than 60 percent dedicated to army needs in 2015 and 2016. Football clubs in Donbas provided security for those mobilized against the Russian-led military operation in Kharkiv, Odessa and other cities.

Polarization and competition around such topics as gender equality and LGBTIQ rights have manifested themselves through the organization of parallel events or counter rallies of groups that support traditional family and religious values, such as the Family Festival in Kyiv and the World Congress of Family in Tbilisi. The intervention of the police has not always prevented attacks on activists supporting gender equality or LGBTIQ rights by radical groups in Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine. Political violence against activists and journalists remains a problem in all countries.

Digital media has also been used for disinformation campaigns about government and non-governmental actors. In Armenia, for example, photos of Open Society employees were posted online on the Facebook page Veto to encourage the targeting of individuals. Non-legal means have been even more common, discrediting individual civil society representatives, branding organizations as “foreign agents,”

²⁹ Fiscal State Service of Moldova, [The State Tax Service has Completed the Processing of Data on the Percentage Designation—about 16,000 taxpayers have Designated 2% of Income Tax](#), September 28, 2017.

and smear campaigns, such as in Moldova between 2016 and 2019, often supported by Kremlin-sponsored activities.³⁰

Similar to the setting up of GONGOs, governments are also using the same tools developed by civil society to pursue different ends. Alternative fact-checking websites linked to conservative groups focus on analyzing compliance with the electoral promises of the new government in Armenia.³¹ In Ukraine, with local authorities enjoying greater powers for public procurement, some have taken to using participative budgets. But these are criticized by local activists as façade exercises that do not positively affect public procurement and corruption. Indeed, much protest has been around the management of city spaces and the environment.

As civil society becomes savvier, the pushback against it also evolves.

Fluid, horizontal and more spontaneous mobilization and network building have thus been fostered by the use of social media and the creation of digital platforms. These have encouraged mobilization on local issues and helped reach wider and more diverse audiences. These events and episodes could evolve into broader trends as they begin to be accompanied by efforts to crowdfund and to promote local philanthropy, as well as by involving social entrepreneurship and by mobilizing volunteers on an unprecedented scale around specific issues (for example, the war in Ukraine or domestic violence in Azerbaijan).

As civil society becomes savvier, the pushback against it also evolves. The same tools are used by far-right groups that, however small, have high capacity for mobilization and disrupt parades and local initiatives. Governments too can use tools demanded

by civil society, such as participative budgets and citizen consultations, as a tick-the-box exercise that is ultimately not implemented but window dresses good governance. Disinformation abounds in a context vulnerable to poor quality information and a weak press.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There are considerable difficulties in drawing a clear delimitation of civil society and, relatedly, civic actors and civic space. While conventional understandings have a clear Western-centric basis going back to the transition studies of the 1990s, reality does not always map neatly onto those. Illiberal and conservative actors or those closely related to governments populate civic space as do protest movements and local activism. A wider conceptualization of civil society better reflects the fluid and changing situations in the Eastern Partnership countries. This will enable donors to improve their engagement with civil society through a better understanding of local contexts and thus lead to better evidence-based decisionmaking. It also enhances the flexibility donors need to address ever-changing civic space.

In recent years, new generations of activists have not followed the classic Western CSO model. This has several sources. The context in which CSOs operate is critical, especially where war or repression has forced them to adapt their strategies. Disillusionment with political reform and with previous generations of CSOs also played a role in shaping the preferences of new civic actors.

The ubiquity of GONGOs and the rise of far-right groups also shapes the civic environment. These include legitimate movements and groups, mostly with a strong illiberal and nationalist agenda, though the independence of some can be called into question if and when they are used as proxies by foreign governments. Their number and size are less important than their ability to mobilize and their presence in the media. And some resort to political violence in country contexts that often features impunity and lack of action by law-enforcement authorities.

30 April Gordon, A New Eurasian Far Right Rising: Reflections on Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia, Freedom House Special Report, January 2020.

31 DFRLab, "Armenia Assailed by Deceptive Fact-Checking Groups," Medium, 2019.

Some new civic actors favor grassroots action over the more traditional “political” democracy and human rights CSO work. They often engage with local communities on local issues—such as disability rights, culture, or neighborhood developments—that are one step removed from traditional political work. These groups contribute to citizen empowerment and can play a role in stimulating local philanthropy.

Donors should support these initiatives, though this should not obscure the continuing need for supporting organizations and actors still working on issues such as human rights, transparency, anti-corruption, gender equality, and minority rights that “professionalized” CSOs have been addressing for some time. Indeed, the space for CSOs—the legal frameworks in which they operate, the independence of the media that can inform on CSO activity, the transparency to run organizations independently of interference and manipulation, and fair law enforcement—are still under threat in the EaP countries.

The fluidity of the present environment and the rapid changes that the EaP countries have experienced call for flexible donor tools if financial support is to reach new civic actors.

Donor support to both established CSOs and new civic actors should be flanked by diplomatic and political work on their part to signal to governments without fail that a healthy civil society is not just about numbers of organizations but about ensuring a safe environment for their work. For example, officials in the diplomatic representations in the EaP countries should be present at trials against activists, as a way to apply pressure against repression and offer political not just financial support. Given the efforts to restrict foreign funding, public diplomacy to support individual victims of smear campaigns may be counter-productive, but this should not deter from unfailing political and financial support of a healthy environment for civil society.

The fluidity of the present environment and the rapid changes that the EaP countries have experienced call for flexible donor tools if financial support is to reach new civic actors. Sub-granting is a useful way to overcome excessive focus on large professional CSOs based in capital cities and to spread funding to more diverse groups across the EaP countries. The EU has recently adapted its strategies to support sub-granting, but the implementation and impact of this still need to be evaluated. Rapid-reaction mechanisms and initiatives to reach individual democracy and human rights activists already exist, such as the European Endowment for Democracy and the Human Rights Defenders tool, and have been strengthened because they are effective.

A stronger field presence through the greater numbers of staff of their embassies that deal with local civil society would help donors stay abreast of the evolution of civic space at the grassroots level, and to identify new initiatives and actors at an early stage. This would also make it more possible to establish wider networks of CSOs and civic actors in each country. Donor staff could travel in their respective countries more and act as “diplomats in the field” rather than project administrators or overseers. Local politics and working with local authorities is of particular importance, and is one area where several CSOs work with few resources. Supporting local projects would also help bridge the urban-rural divide as well as engage with bottom-up activities and with issues that have a broader societal impact. This would also require non-local donor staff to acquire the language of the country in which they operate—a requirement that surprisingly few foreign services pursue. Such language training expected to work in the field ought to be an essential tool to strengthen donor presence and visibility on the ground.

The fluidity of the civic landscape in the EaP countries also calls for greater flexibility in supporting projects and new actors. Here some risk-taking may be necessary, especially if engaging with young groups and movements that do not have a solid institutional and financial set-up. Some of these often use novel

fundraising methods, such as crowdfunding, precisely to avoid burdensome organizational structures that require specific administrative expertise. Many new groups or movements do not have or want institutionalized structures, nor do they have a proven record of absorption capacity for foreign funding. If donors want to engage with them, they need to adapt their tools to allow for lighter procedures for financial support—and factor in the risks of poorly spent funding.

Donors could also focus on bridge-building initiatives to narrow some of the gaps that have emerged in the EaP countries, not only between urban and rural areas but also within civil society between older CSOs and the newer actors. Both types of civic actors are often keen to preserve their autonomy and independence, but it is in the interest of all to consult and cooperate on common challenges such as improving the legal environment for CSOs, accessing public information, or fighting corruption. Here there may even be space to consult with conservative and illiberal civic actors, providing they respect democratic processes.

The civic landscape in the EaP has evolved rapidly in recent years, revealing nuanced dynamics, a fluid environment, and a significant resilience to repression, illiberal interference, war, and political violence. This takes place against a background of attachment to deeply conservative values promoted by influential religious authorities and of feeble rule of law in the best cases.

The dynamism is often tied to a movement away from traditional mobilization that has supported democratic transition toward less overtly political mobilization. While the traditional political issues relating to human rights and democracy need continued and reinforced attention, the mobilization of citizens around a more diverse range of topics is also important: it helps bottom-up empowerment and local capacity for autonomous CSOs, as well as broadening the range of issues addressed by civil society as a whole and better reflecting citizen priorities and perceptions. The fluidity, however, also presents opportunities for spoilers to undermine the civic space.

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