



EASTERN PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

EXPERT VIEWS

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

EXPERT VIEWS



StrategEast center for a new economy has the mission to reinforce the values of the rule of law and private property protection in Eurasian and Baltic countries through the transition from natural-resource-based to knowledge-driven economies.

Its work is focused on the 14 countries that proclaimed or restored their independence after the collapse of the USSR: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

StrategEast is a registered 501(c) 3 organization based in the United States with regional offices in Ukraine and Georgia.

**LEARN MORE
AT OUR WEBSITE:**

www.StrategEast.org

**THIS REPORT
WAS WRITTEN BY**

Heghine Aleksanyan
Artem Bidenko
Kateryna Bornukova
Gevorg Gasparyan
Igor Girlea
Kakha Gogolashvili
Hakob Hakobyan
Dzmitry Halubnichy

Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu
Shahla Ismayil
David Kiziria
Teona Kupunia
Ivan Nagornyak
Narine Petrosyan
Alina Shcherbyna
Maryna Shevtsova

Arseny Sivitsky
Mariam Sumbadze
Ion Tăbârță
David Tsiskaridze
Nina Vaisman
Vahan V. Yeghiazaryan

© 2021 StrategEast. All rights reserved.

Cover photos by symbiot / shutterstock.com and Alexandros Michailidis / shutterstock
StrategEast Westernization Report 2021 is available on our website: www.StrategEast.org

This report was prepared with the support of the Axios Holding



StrategEast

1900 K Street, NW
Suite 100
Washington, D. C. 20006
office@strategeast.org
www.StrategEast.org

Concept: Michael Sheitelman
Project Coordinator: Lidia Shavlo
Editor: Courtney Dobson
Design: Vitaly Tchirkov
Page Proof: Constantin Leites

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	6
Executive Summary	7
Five Long-Term Goals for the Eastern Partnership Policy	8
A New Common Economic Space between the EU and the EaP	12
Digital Economy and Society Index	18
The Enhancement of the IT Sector in the Eastern Partnership	24
EU 4 Gender Equality: Together Against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence	28
Reducing the Digital Divide	33
Independent Media and Civil Society Development	37
EU's COVID-19 Macro-Financial Assistance Package for its Eastern Neighborhood	42
Expert Biographies	47
Policy Recommendations	50



INTRODUCTION

In the course of the last year, the Eastern Partnership, a joint initiative of the European Union and six East European partners, went through a kind of crash test. At the beginning of the second decade of its work, the Eastern Partnership has encountered unprecedented challenges:

The transitional economies of six East European and Caucasus countries are facing significant difficulties caused by lockdowns during the pandemic.

The imperfection of the health care system in some countries has brought the population to the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe.

Military conflict has unfolded between two participants of the Eastern Partnership — Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The EU countries did not recognize the results of the presidential election. Belarus downgraded its status in the Eastern Partnership to an “expert” level.

From a global perspective, the Eastern Partnership did not look good. But to have a more complete understanding about the condition of the Eastern Partnership, it is important to examine the local perspective from member country experts.

Last year, I was honored to present the StrategEast Westernization Award to one of the founders of the Eastern Partnership, former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt. At the award ceremony, among the successes of the initiative, including such things as trade agreements and visa-free

travel, Mr. Bildt highlighted “thousands of small integrations and small cooperations” that make up the cooperation between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries in the first place. These “small things” are discussed in the experts’ opinions. StrategEast collected these pieces in response to all the most significant events of 2020 related to the EU and member countries of the Eastern Partnership. These stories will help the representatives of Western institutions engaged in the initiative to see the results of their activity from local perspective.

First, this will demonstrate that the efforts undertaken by the EU is yielding results.

Second, it will make clear that these efforts have an impact on the citizens of the Eastern Partnership countries, and the EU will undoubtedly be earning new advocates in their person, regardless of how relations develop at the state level.

And finally, the main goal of this report is to present European institutions an opportunity to adapt their programs of cooperation with the European Partnership countries based on received feedback and to shift the focus of collaboration to the issues demanded by civil society, so that the initiative works in the best possible way for the benefit of those for whom it was conceived — for the tens of millions of residents of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Anatoly Motkin
President of StrategEast

Executive Summary

Within the last year, at the request of StrategEast, experts from the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries commented on the most critical issues of the Eastern Partnership, new EU initiatives related to the Eastern Partnership, and correspondence to EU standards of governance in the Eastern Partnership. For this report, the topics discussed included the main priorities in EU-EaP relations, the establishment of a unified economic space, participation of the EaP countries in a Digital Single Market, gender equality, digital transformation, development of civil society, and the 2020-specific issue of cooperation in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic. The following trends were detected:

1. Speaking of prioritized goals of EU and EaP country cooperation, most experts highlight the economy and, particularly, the digital economy. At the same time, there are countries with their own specific requests to prioritize different spheres. For example, the Georgian expert emphasizes cooperation on security, while the Ukrainian expert emphasizes assistance in development of social institutions.
2. The idea of a unified economic space is perceived ambiguously by the EaP country experts. Most EaP countries see positive prospects of creating such a space. However, experts from countries that are also members of the Eurasian Economic Union (Armenia and Belarus) do not believe in the possibility of such a project, and even fear that attempts to create one may lead to economic difficulties in their countries.
3. The majority of experts believe that for their countries' economies, and primarily for the local IT industries, creating a Digital Single Market in the EU may produce new opportunities that must be taken advantage of. To do this, they expect their governments to develop digital ecosystems that are deeply integrated with the pan-European one. States and large high-tech companies from the EU should not fear investing in the IT sector of the EaP countries, as these countries could become valuable to the EU, specifically as manufacturers of high-tech products.
4. The state structures of the EaP countries, according to experts, should make great efforts to digitalize public services, as well as promote digital literacy to reduce the gap with European partners.
5. Regarding gender equality, experts from all countries note that the legislative work to ensure such equality has been done and gender equality exists "on paper" to the fullest extent. However, gender equality has not become part of social norms due to the traditional way of life in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. There is still a difference in wages between men and women, laws on domestic violence do not work, some areas of employment are traditionally considered male or female. This problem is particularly visible in the Caucasus countries, especially in Azerbaijan, where traditional social norms and stereotypes dominate.
6. It was impossible to identify a common vector in the level of civil society development in the EaP countries. On the one hand, according to Moldovan experts, only the efforts of civil society ensure the rule of law in the country; in Armenia, civil society, de facto, governs the country to a greater extent than the official government; and Ukraine has significantly developed a "culture of participation" in recent years. On the other hand, civil society in Belarus and Azerbaijan face more severe constraints. At the same time, during the mass protests in 2020 in Belarus, civil society played a critical role by providing the population with reliable information about what was happening, despite many restrictions. Experts from most countries expect more help from the EU for the development of local civil society institutions, given their role in organizing public processes and their capacity to influence state functions.
7. On EU assistance to EAP countries in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, most experts suggest that part of it should be directed not to the state at the national level, but to civil society institutions at the local level. The experts are grateful to the EU for the assistance provided, and urge, despite significant distrust in local governments, not to refuse contributions to local educational organizations, to provide direct support to health care institutions, business associations, including bypassing the central government, which often uses these funds obscurely.

The experts interviewed, apart from a few individual cases, represent exclusively non-governmental organizations. Their statements largely reflect the views and wishes of civil society regarding prospects of cooperation between the EU and their countries within the Eastern Partnership framework.

Five Long-Term Goals for the Eastern Partnership Policy

Following the Eastern Partnership leaders' videoconference on June 18, EU leaders identified five **long-term goals for the Eastern Partnership policy**.

The **first priority** is an economy-focused partnership that creates jobs, contacts between countries, and opportunities for youth.

The **second priority** is strengthening state institutions, respect for human rights, gender equality, and the rule of law.

The **third priority** is called the "partnership that unites" – digital transformation.

The EU will work with partners to modernize the necessary infrastructure.

The **fourth priority** is sustainability, including climate change and the corresponding response to it.

The **fifth priority** is for the European Commission to continue to inform citizens of the EaP countries about the tangible results they receive from cooperation with the EU.



Digital Transformation Can Foster Deeper Connectivity Projects in Armenia

■ Narine Petrosyan and Haghine Aleksanyan

In which areas are the results of cooperation between the EU and your country most visible now? Are there any priorities for your country that were not mentioned at the videoconference of the EaP leaders?

The Eastern Partnership leaders' videoconference on June 18, 2020, proved once again that partnership goals beyond 2020 have significantly widened, and what is more important, it's now offering greater avenues for integration.

Before the live summit due in 2021, it is important to consider various options that might better reflect the interests of both EU and EaP countries. As the pandemic intervened, it has accelerated the importance of linkages, be they institutional, socioeconomic, or political. From this perspective, from all the main goals showcased during the videoconference, the third priority takes precedence as it's focused on digital transformation and can foster deeper connectivity projects, even in the case of impossibility of people-to-people, live contacts. It also plays a vital role for the Republic of Armenia. Taking into account that the pandemic had strongly hit Armenian society and its health system, (especially after the gradual resumption of economic activities when the number of infected people increased significantly creating additional pressure on the health system), the modernization of technologies, high-quality infrastructure, and services are the key factors that can have a real impact on the lives of people, not only in Armenia but also across the region. Therefore, in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, initiatives such as the EU4Digital and the EaPConnect become more important.

The EU's EU4Digital Initiative supports the digital reform agenda in Armenia with a range of actions to promote key areas of the digital economy and society in line with EU practices. It's one of the essential aspects of cooperation for Armenia in the field of e-government and digitization, and strengthens EU-Armenia cooperation, with a focus on Telecom Rules, Trust and Security, e-Trade, ICT Innovation, e-Health, and e-Skills. The outcomes of the initiative result in improved online services for Armenian citizens, at better prices, and with greater choice, attracting investments, boosting trade and employment, as well as strengthening cooperation with EU member states and within the Eastern Partnership.

The EaPConnect project decreases the digital divide and improves intraregional connectivity by building productive human networks between its EaP partners, other national research and education networks, and e-infrastructures.

Besides that, it's also crucial to carry out joint projects on the consolidation of the health systems and crisis management capacities. Joint projects can be initiated and implemented in the field of improving infrastructure in the health sector, facilitating the flow of essential products, and the like.

Thus, the EU-Armenia cooperation within the framework of digital cooperation together with other priorities highlighted during the videoconference of the EaP leaders can have a powerful, transformative influence in Armenia and all partner countries and create linkages to building a common space, especially now that digital platforms have become one of the primary links in the fight against the pandemic.

Economy-Focused Azerbaijan-EU Cooperation Demonstrates the Most Tangible Results

■ Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu

In which areas are the results of cooperation between the EU and your country most visible now?

My analysis and observation show that Azerbaijan has acquired the most tangible results of the cooperation of an economy-focused partnership with the EU. Thus, Azerbaijan accounts for 78% of EU trade with the South Caucasus region. In 2018, the EU's share in Azerbaijan's foreign trade was 42%. The EU has invested USD 33.6 billion in the Azerbaijani economy, and Azerbaijan — up to USD 15 billion in the EU. More than 1,600 companies from EU countries operate in Azerbaijan.

Besides, starting next year, the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) is expected to transport 10 billion cubic meters of gas annually to Europe each year. TAP will meet 33% of Bulgaria's gas needs, 20% of Greece's, and 10.5% of Italy's.

Are there any priorities for your country that were not mentioned at the videoconference of the EaP leaders?

Although the rule of law has been mentioned, cooperation in ensuring anti-corruption and transparency, combating money laundering, and asset recovery and return policy could also be included in the list of priorities.

Hard Security Risks and Hybrid Threats Should Not be Disregarded amid EU-Georgia Cooperation

■ Kakha Gogolashvili

In which areas are the results of cooperation between the EU and your country most visible now?

For many years, the EU has been supporting and guiding Georgia's democratic building, so there has been cooperation on issues like of the rule of law, good governance, human rights, and strengthening of institutions. The issues are mentioned in the preamble and the first chapter of the Association Agreement and represent the subject of permanent political dialogue set up earlier by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) and later by the Association Agreement. Thanks to the intensive EU's intervention and fruitful cooperation and receptiveness from the Georgian side, the democratic performance in the country has been considerably improving for the last two decades. This issue has never lost its importance and it is early to count the problem of democratic change resolved. There are still problems present in all mentioned directions, and the EU and Georgia, including government, the political class, and civil society need to work hard on building a better, truly European state.

Economic cooperation between the EU and Georgia, always being a declared priority, has never become effective. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas in force now promises expansion of trade relations and an increase in investments. Trade in goods are gradually increasing and the EU-27 is the biggest trade partner for the country, but still accounts for 26% of the total Georgian trade, which is not a desirable level for a country with European aspirations. New projects of connectivity (TEN-T, Open Air) should decrease a relative physical distance from Europe and certainly have an impact on trade and investments. Development of possibilities of digital trade, also mentioned during the conference, should ease access of Georgian goods to the EU's internal market.

Climate change and cooperation on environmental issues is also of pressing importance. Transformation of the EaP area and Georgia, in particular, should be streamlined toward a green economy, which was not duly represented in the EU's policy/conditionality toward Georgia. It is time to push the country — its urban, agricultural, and energy development — toward environmentally friendly, long-term solutions. Therefore, the focus on sustainable development made by EU officials during the videoconference was very timely.

Despite the latest efforts, the EU is still very weakly covering its activities in EaP countries. While the majority of the population in Georgia is not aware about EU support and EU projects, hostile Russian and Euroskeptical propaganda causes thousands of citizens to charge their minds with doubts and negative thinking on the EU's systemic (in)efficiency. So, it is also an important priority, which needs to be well-managed.

Are there any priorities for your country that were not mentioned at the videoconference of the EaP leaders?

The European Commission mentioned the resilience of EaP countries as an important issue to focus on. Indeed, the focus is expected to be put on economic and social dimensions. This is understandable as the most important risks the countries face in the post-COVID period relate to economic decline and social hardship, followed by possible political instabilities. Indeed, the resilience of the countries toward the **hard security risks and even more toward the hybrid threats** should not be disregarded and needs to be acknowledged as a priority for the EU in its future action.

Infrastructure Development Could be Added as an EU-Moldova Cooperation Priority

■ Igor Girlea

In which areas are the results of cooperation between the EU and your country most visible now? Are there any priorities for your country that were not mentioned at the videoconference of the EaP leaders?

It is hard to conclude in which of the aforementioned areas the most tangible results of cooperation between the EU and Moldova can be observed because the framework

of cooperation is multidimensional, and thus it's almost impossible to apprehend the exact impact cooperation has on Moldova. To assess the results, we must judge based on the cooperation Moldova had before, not on the relations that exist now. Based on the previous cooperation results, it could be said that the third priority is the one in which Moldova, thanks to European cooperation, achieved some remarkable

results compared to countries in the region. Of course, the area mentioned in the priority also obtained a big boost because of the EU-Moldova cooperation, but unfortunately, because of the low capacity to absorb the European funds and to efficiently use European expertise — Moldova didn't use the full capacity of the cooperation in this regard.

The Moldovan government declared as a priority development of the infrastructure on the national level (roads, water pipelines, gas pipelines, etc.) which is not directly reflected

in the mentioned priorities. It is certain that the EaP countries are in need of developing their infrastructure to sustainably develop their economy, but because of the endemic corruption that flourishes in EaP countries, it is highly improbable that the EU will set the infrastructure development as a priority for the EU-EaP member state cooperation agenda.

The set priorities, though important for the development of the EaP countries, will have no crucial impact on the development of the EaP countries.

EU-Ukraine Cooperation was Most Successful in the Development of Society

■ Ivan Nagornyak

In which areas are the results of cooperation between the EU and your country most visible now?

The previous EU initiative that specified the vectors for the EaP development was "20 deliverables for 2020." The Joint Staff Working Document on "Eastern Partnership — 20 Deliverables for 2020: focusing on key priorities and tangible results" was presented by the European Commission in December 2016 and endorsed at the 2017 Eastern Partnership (EaP) Brussels Summit. It was a concrete Action Plan with 20 deliverables that the EU was eager to achieve by 2020 in the EaP countries' economy, governance, connectivity, and society.

According to the European Union External Action Service (EEAS) evaluation of deliverables, the most tangible results were achieved in society development. Of course, the most popular result was an introduction of the "visa-free" regime with the EU for citizens of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Nevertheless, the EU has estimated that the establishment of the EaP European School in Tbilisi has achieved the most progress in the social sector. That's why I agree that in the "long run," further investment in young people's skills through providing more opportunities could bring the best results for the EaP countries' development.

In addition, Ukraine and other associated partners have strong incentives for further integration into the EU Digital Single Market. To achieve this goal, the EU must support the full implementation of the partner countries' commitments in the Association Agreements and invest more into their digital infrastructure.

Are there any priorities for your country that were not mentioned at the videoconference of the EaP leaders?

Ukraine and Georgia several times demonstrated their willingness to have more opportunities to cooperate with the EU in the security area. Such cooperation could bring a

lot of mutual benefits for all parties, as now they are facing the same threats. Besides that, providing the opportunity to interact within the Permanent Structured Cooperation (*PESCO*) initiative and to access the European Defence Fund (EDF) could strengthen the defense capacities of Ukraine and Georgia. It requires a political decision at the EU Council level, but Ukraine and Georgia's practical experience in tackling Russian aggression can be very useful in preparing European security measures.

I would also like to add that tackling an enormous economic inequality should become a more visible priority for the EU-Ukraine cooperation. Of course, the main sources of this problem are money laundering and corruption. But, also the possibility to hide incomes from taxes, increase profits by providing poor working conditions at their enterprises and pay unofficial salaries for workers.

That's why a possible additional priority for the EU-Ukraine cooperation could be strengthening institutional capabilities of executive bodies that provide relevant state audit, mainly at the local level, so that the EU support in strengthening the rule of law and social rights could become more visible in all regions of Ukraine. Especially since according to Chapter 21 "Cooperation on employment, social policy and equal opportunities" of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement there are numbers of the EU social and labor norms that Ukraine should implement into its legislation and realize it on the ground.

A New Common Economic Space between the EU and the EaP

According to a draft report leaked in April 2020, the European Parliament intends to call for the creation of a new **common economic space between the EU and the countries of the Eastern Partnership**. The move aims at “gradual integration” of the EaP countries to the bloc.

Common Economic Space with the EU: Challenges for Armenia

■ Heghine Aleksanyan

The year 2009 marked the creation of the EaP: A joint policy initiative launched to deepen relations between the EU and the six Eastern neighbors: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. EaP is also a specific dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy where, besides political or security objectives, trade relations are also intended to play an important role to promote economic growth and stability in countries bordering the EU. These refer also to the EU's eastern neighbors including the Republic of Armenia.

Despite disagreements over the extent to which expectations of partners were met, the last decade of cooperation helped to create the necessary conditions for accelerating political association and further economic integration between the EU and interested EaP countries. Of course, at the same time, each of the EaP countries have experienced various degrees of change in their domestic politics and foreign policy orientations. It would be fair to say that the EU's common approach to EaP countries was challenged from the beginning not only because of differences between the six countries but also because of the geopolitical context. This point is also reflected in the draft report which confirms the sovereign right of the EaP countries to freely choose their level of cooperation or integration with the EU.

Currently, Armenia is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). From this perspective, the EU appears as the main economic alternative to Russia and the EEU, because of its geographical proximity and its unique market. Although Russia continues to be Armenia's main trade and investment partner, since 2018, Armenia has a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU, which mainly clarifies the areas of potential cooperation that are compatible with Armenia's new commitments deriving from its participation in the EEU. The EEU is currently in the development process with many changes yet to come as the union also aims to harmonize/align standards in a wide variety of fields, and like the EU, envisages free movement of goods, services, people, and capital.

On the other hand, unlike the EU's founding treaties, the EEU Treaty does not call for "ever closer union," nor does it invoke shared values. Thus, these differences and contrasting nature in the EU and EEU policies will be one of the biggest challenges for Armenia in terms of the potential level of

integration in EU-EaP "common economic space." The level of "integration" of Armenia will be conditioned with Armenia's membership in the EEU. At least, for now, the membership of Armenia in the customs union means accepting joint EEU external tariffs and losing the freedom to conclude members' own trade agreements.

Besides that, the security issues and frozen conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan remain an obstacle to stability and prosperity in the region. This means that Armenia's steps of "integration" will be determined or maybe "limited" with carefulness toward security challenges in the region.

Considering the fact that EU-Russia relations took a sharp turn for the worse during the past decade and Russia's dominance in the EEU, these factors could be also an obstacle to closer integration for Armenia, especially when taking into account that the EEU is not only an economic union but also has geopolitical significance.

Except for country-specific challenges, there are also common issues that need to be determined by the EU and EaP countries.

First of all, the extent to which each of the six countries aspires to integration, and how much, and what kind of cooperation assistance the EU can offer will be a determining factor for the creation of EU-EaP common economic space.

The second challenge for the creation of a common economic space is the differences between the six partner countries, which have not diminished over the past 10 years. These differences are partly linked to their geographic and economic situation but are also an expression of their perceived identity and vision of the future.

The creation of a "common economic space" between the EU and EaP countries itself is a courageous step considering the diverse nature and inner social and political characteristics, security challenges, conflicting interests, and the role of the EEU and Russia in the region. However, the past achievements and experience of the Eastern Partnership program, the common ground it has created for the partner states (countries will work together on long-term policy objectives: resilient, sustainable, and integrated economies; accountable institutions, the rule of law and security; environmental and climate resilience; etc.) make the suggested draft on creating a common economic space realistic.

Low Oil Prices Make Common Economic Space with the EU Attractive for Azerbaijan

■ Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu

How well is your country prepared for such integration?

High oil and gas prices in the run-up to the pandemic have never made such initiatives attractive for the government of Azerbaijan, except for integration with the EU's energy union. Therefore, the question about accelerating integration to the EU market was not on the list. However, after the fall in oil prices on the world market, the economic interest of the Azerbaijani government in such initiatives will increase, because there are no other alternatives for the modernization of the economy and producing new and competitive products. Therefore, I think that in the post-pandemic period, Azerbaijan's interest in participating in such economic initiatives will increase due to the involvement of foreign direct investment and an increase benefit from integration. At the same time, a common economic space can also be an alternative to Azerbaijan's delayed accession to the WTO. The integration of the energy market, transport community, and single digital market, as well as telecommunications, can be one of the possibilities of gradual integration to the EU market for Azerbaijan.

In what areas is your country's leadership ready to maximize economic integration with the EU: in universalizing economic legislation, in removing customs barriers, in creating a single labor market?

Unfortunately, Azerbaijan has no other competitive export product other than oil and gas to bring to the European market. These products have always been easy access to the European market. Due to the low competitiveness of the non-oil and gas export sector, it will not lead to significant changes in cooperation in the context of a common economic space. This initiative could have an impact on the export of European technologies and innovations to the Eastern Partnership countries, as well as Azerbaijan. This can be considered especially important for the post-pandemic period.

Azerbaijan, as a non-WTO member, needs more cooperation

in the context of universalization and unification of economic legislation. There are no customs barriers to oil and gas resources in Europe. Therefore, it does not make sense for Azerbaijan to remove customs barriers in the EU's energy market. As for creating a single labor market, this does not seem realistic after the pandemic, as the 7.4% decline in Europe itself will create tension in this market.

How would the possible "common economic space" be affected by the fact that in the Eastern Partnership, there are both countries aimed at EU membership, such as Ukraine, and there are also those that directly deny this possibility, such as Belarus?

The pandemic will put the economies of the Eastern Partnership countries in a similar position. In this case, economic behavior will change. First of all, a common economic space will increase the attractiveness of Ukraine, as more integrated, and for Belarus, as less embedded in the post-pandemic period concerning the recovering economy as soon as possible. This initiative can increase the economic benefits for all EaP countries because all of them demand new technology and capital.

And finally, how would the common economic space with the EU be affected by the membership of some EaP countries in the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia?

The Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia is more of a political union, rather than an economic one. The change of position on membership in this union depends only on the political process in Russia. Due to the increased cost of recession, it will not be easy for Russia to become a leader in the Eurasian region this year, as they usually are. Therefore, the strengthening integration of the common economic space may negatively affect the participation of Armenia and Belarus in the Russian-led union. However, it will mostly depend on how Russia emerges from the crisis and less on the newly established common economic space.

Economic Integration with the EU not Aimed at Belarus

■ Kateryna Bornukova

How well is your country prepared for such integration? In what areas is your country's leadership ready to maximize economic integration with the EU: in universalizing economic legislation, in removing customs barriers, in creating a single labor market?

This integration is certainly not aimed at Belarus: Our country still has no Partnership Agreement with the EU, and further economic integration, while welcome, is not on the table. It is not being debated within the country as there is a firm understanding it is out of reach for Belarus. Moreover, while some integration is definitely possible (and Belarus is in constant dialogue with the EU on the removal of some quotas and tariffs, for example), removing customs barriers or a single labor market is not on the table.

How would the possible "common economic space" be affected by the fact that in the Eastern Partnership there are both countries aimed at EU membership, such as Ukraine, and there are also those that directly deny this possibility, such as Belarus?

Many of the Eastern Partnerships initiatives are designed to address the countries that proclaim the desire to enter the EU in the future and do not take into account the needs or possibilities of the countries like Belarus that do not have this ambition. It does not mean that Belarus is not welcoming certain integration steps, but unfortunately, it cannot follow the path created for the EU accession track countries, and often, no alternative path is offered.

And finally, how would the common economic space with the EU be affected by the membership of some EaP countries in the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia?

The Eurasian Economic Union implies a common economic space and a customs union for its members. Hence, Belarus, as a member, cannot unilaterally join the EaP-EU common economic space. Again, it does not exclude trade liberalization altogether, but any kind of a customs union would have to be agreed with the Eurasian Economic Union.

Georgia is Positively Inclined to the Common Economic Space with the EU

■ Kakha Gogolashvili

How well is your country prepared for such integration?

Georgia has made the integration to the EU its main foreign policy priority. Indeed, the goal to be reached requires intensive work on internal policy reform and change. The reforms related to the legal and regulatory environment, in practically all spheres, aim at a high level of convergence to the EU Acquis in energy, transport, finance, agriculture, labor rights, human rights, and so on. The EU-Georgia Association Agreement demands from the country to transpose around 20% of essential parts of the EU Acquis having an impact on the free movement of goods and services, that is, acquiring a stake and gradual integration into the EU internal market. The Association Agreement chapter on the freedom of establishments also refers to the possibilities for Georgian service providers to conduct cross-border services or establish these under certain conditions in the EU. From the other side, the Visa Dialogue, which at the first stage brought a visa waiver for Georgian citizens visiting the EU for up to three months, has the perspective (if positively developed) to

expand citizens' freedom of movement up to the freedom of residence and work in the EU. Mobility partnership, called to establish stable circular labor migration from Georgia to the EU, could also contribute to such an evolution in the future.

In what areas is your country's leadership ready to maximize economic integration with the EU: in universalizing economic legislation, in removing customs barriers, in creating a single labor market?

The Association Agreement and other relevant EU initiatives provide great possibilities for closer cooperation and a high degree of the functional integration in many sectors: the establishment of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, with total removal of trade and non-trade barriers; energy, in which the membership of European Energy Community has been granted; transport — at this stage, inclusion in the project of TEN-T extension (for all EaP countries); security — participation in the The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations and further involvement in the "structured cooperation"; and the Common Aviation

Area agreement. The Association Agreement also implies for Georgia to adopt the EU's Electronic Commerce rules, which may prepare the country for its inclusion in the EU's Digital Market. Cooperation in many other fields and sectors will be further deepened with the help of the Sectoral Dialogue on Highest Level established between the EU and Georgia in 2018. Gaining access to the EU's specialized agencies and programs paves ways for the country's functional integration into the EU's common policies on education and science, accreditation and standardization, environmental protection, food safety, police, judiciary, and many others. As a resume — Georgia has already strong instruments for conducting functional integration with the EU and the Common Economic Space, and if established, will be easily accepted and adopted by Georgia.

How would the possible “common economic space” be affected by the fact that in the Eastern Partnership, there are both countries aimed at EU membership, such as Ukraine, and there are those that directly deny this possibility, such as Belarus?

From the recent EaP report, we can tacitly observe the impossibility of creating the full-fledged economic community with all six EaP states is acknowledged. At least two countries have memberships in the Customs Union, contradictory to any preferential trade arrangements with EU, or other third states. Therefore, it seems that the European Parliament will be advocating establishing a deep cooperation format for all six, only in areas where such an institutional arrangement

is possible. These areas are — energy, transport, trade in services (partly), freedom of movement of workers, digital trade and digital market, and sustainable development. Approximation to EU norms in all areas, where it is possible, will be welcome and encouraged in such an agreement. Otherwise, the agreement of a Common Economic Space could be based on the “concentric circles” method and offer to its parties differentiated rates of integration. The associated EaP countries can be placed in the closest circle of integration with the EU and the rest in the second and third circles.

How would the common economic space with the EU be affected by the membership of some EaP countries in the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia?

Obviously, membership in the Eurasian Economic Union will not allow Armenia and Belarus, not only to establish a free trade area with the EU but also to converge their legislation and regulatory frameworks in many areas, including transport, energy, food safety, customs, taxation, and so forth. So, their participation in the proposed EU-led Common Economic Space would be subjected to limitations. In the best case, they may join such a space, but with the provisions adopted in a *mutatis mutandis* way. In the worst case, Russia, exercising strong political control over them, will not allow joining at all. This does not mean that the idea will be “buried” from the beginning. At least three associated states can fully enjoy membership in such a space, with the open prospect and chances for Azerbaijan (if the country agrees to reform politically), and at some future point to Armenia and Belarus too.

Ukraine Best Prepared for Further Economic Integration with the EU among EaP Countries

■ Ivan Nagornyak

How well is your country prepared for such integration?

I assume the Common Economic Space will be based on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas operating under the Association Agreements with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The level of economic integration of these countries allows for a dialogue on broader cooperation in a number of areas. With the updated Annex XXVII (Energy) to the Association Agreement, Ukraine has launched a mechanism of consultations with the EU on legislative initiatives related to energy. This may become a model for further integration in other sectors of the economy, so Ukraine is best prepared among EaP countries for further economic integration with the EU. It would be great if the proposed Common Economic Space included, as a basic element, the functioning of

Agreements on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Goods, which has been ready for signing for over a year.

In what areas is your country's leadership ready to maximize economic integration with the EU: in universalizing economic legislation, in removing customs barriers, in creating a single labor market?

Ukraine is working on all possible areas of economic integration, as the Association Agreement includes all possible areas of trade and economic cooperation. Due to this, the EU is our largest trading partner. Currently, the greatest opportunities are in the digital sphere, in particular through the maximum accession to the EU Digital Single Market, as the parties have repeatedly stated. But the liberalization of customs procedures can bring many opportunities for

small and medium-sized businesses in Ukraine; within the Association bodies, Ukraine is constantly working to make it a reality. Currently, the crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic does not allow us to talk about the creation of a common labor market. I do not think that in the medium-term, EU member states will be ready for such a dialogue. Although to protect Ukrainian workers in the EU, this would be a great initiative that would also allow better control of migration flows. As one of the first steps in this direction, Ukraine could sign a Mobility Partnership Agreement with the EU, which already operates with all other EaP countries.

How would the possible “common economic space” be affected by the fact that in the Eastern Partnership there are both countries aimed at EU membership, such as Ukraine, and there are also those that directly deny this possibility, such as Belarus?

This is an ever-present issue of the Eastern Partnership format, which unites countries that wish maximum integration with the EU, and those that seek more integration with Russia. I think that the idea of a common economic space will be implemented first of all for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which have signed the Association Agreements. To keep

the other three countries in the same format for Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus there will still be a possibility of accession if they first sign more ambitious Free Trade agreements with the EU. Although such a situation is destructive to the EaP dialogue, as when Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova talk about joint initiatives with the EU to make the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas work better, the other three countries are there as voluntary conciliators.

And finally, how would the common economic space with the EU be affected by the membership of some EaP countries in the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia?

The countries that are members of the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC or *EurAsEC*) have quite ambitious agreements on trade and customs integration, so on a bilateral basis, the rules of one country that is a member of the EurAsEC will be difficult to reconcile with EU rules. Therefore, the only option to include Armenia and Belarus in the Common Economic Space would require a dialogue between the EU and the EurAsEC and some level of integration between these organizations, which is currently unlikely due to Russia’s aggressive policy in the neighborhood countries.



Digital Economy and Society Index

In 2020, the European Commission has released the **Digital Economy and Society Index**, a composite index that summarizes relevant indicators on Europe's digital performance and tracks the evolution of the EU member states in digital competitiveness.

The Index assesses key dimensions of the European information society: Telecom sector, Broadband, Mobile, Internet usage, Internet services, e-Government, e-Commerce, e-Business, ICT Skills, Research and Development.

Armenia Needs to Introduce a Market-Oriented Policy for IT

■ Hakob Hakobyan and Heghine Aleksanyan

Given the positive record of training in STEM subjects in post-Soviet countries and the latest success stories of ICT development in the region, do you think your country can compete with the EU states in terms of ICT sector development?

Undoubtedly, a “Soviet school” played a significant role in laying down the foundation for the contemporary ICT sector. However, that potential should be enhanced by adding market-oriented components, such as commercialization of a given project, adequate project management, etc. By introducing that policy, the ICT sector will become self-sufficient in terms of financial resources and less dependent on external resources. As for competition with the EU countries, this goal is feasible only in the case of finding a unique niche and promoting it or competing with less costly talent-related expenses.

What success stories can you name in e-government services?

During recent years, the Armenian government has implemented several activities aimed at improving e-service delivery. The main focus has been made especially on two components: Governmental Interoperability and Single Electronic Window. And although most of the current e-governance tools still need improvements, there are also

some significant results. Successful projects include websites such as e-gov.am with its budget-presenting interactive tool and other government services provided through the internet; the unified website for publications of draft legal acts (www.e-draft.am), which enables more transparent and open discussion over drafts of legal acts; and the Harkatu.am website for monitoring the thousand highest taxpayers. In addition to that, the State Revenue Committee enhanced its computational capabilities by introducing and integrating a data analyzing system for research in the relevant field.

Can you say that your country possesses strong human capital, skilled in IT?

The success story of ArMath and TUMO — Center for Creative Technologies may hint toward big potential in Armenia for the ICT sector in terms of human capital. Specialized professional skills development programs are also offered by different organizations such as Microsoft Innovation Center Armenia, Synopsys Inc, and others. The competition and quality of University programs with IT specializations have also risen but it is not always sufficient to meet the industry demands. The key is to release such projects from possible bureaucratic chaos and inefficiency, at the same time keeping a high level of integrity of the sector.

ICT to Play a Leading Role in Diversifying the Economy of Azerbaijan

■ Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu

Given the positive record of training in STEM subjects in post-Soviet countries and the latest success stories of ICT development in the region, do you think your country can compete with the EU states in terms of ICT sector development?

The ICT sector is expected to play a leading role in diversifying the economy of Azerbaijan. ICT is Azerbaijan’s second most profitable sector after hydrocarbons. It is also the second-largest recipient of FDI after the oil and gas industry.

Recently, Azerbaijan has been focused on the development of its ICT sector. At present, the Strategic Roadmap for Development of Telecommunications and Information

Technologies in Azerbaijan Republic has been under implementation since 2016. The National Strategy for Information Society Development, which runs from 2014 to 2020, was divided into two distinct stages. The first run from 2014 to 2017 will see the building of an information society and the effective adoption of ICT at all levels of society. Central to this is the e-government endeavor, which seeks to have all key government services functioning entirely online. The second initiative is the State Fund for Development of Information Technologies, run from 2017 to 2020.

To my mind, Azerbaijan cannot compete with the EU states in terms of ICT sector development right now; it will require more time.

What success stories can you name in e-government services? Can you say that your country possesses strong human capital skilled in IT?

Azerspace-1 and Azerspace-2 of the Azercosmos' telecommunications satellite are a great example and one of the success stories for the development of the ICT sector in Azerbaijan.

Having launched the Azerspace-1, the first-ever satellite of Azerbaijan, millions of viewers can access information and communications services worldwide. Azerspace-1 plays a role as an important gateway in a joint space that connects more than 50 countries in Central Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

Azerspace-2 will help Azercosmos meet the growing demand for direct-to-home (DTH) television, government, and network services in Europe, Central and South Asia, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Azerspace-2 will also provide high-power, Ku-band connectivity to the African continent from 45 degrees east in geostationary orbit. Azerspace-2 has been designed for smaller terrestrial antennas and will deliver cross-connectivity between East Africa, West Africa, and Central Africa, as well as Europe and Central Asia.

ICT has strong growth potential in Azerbaijan, and this sector carries the promise of creating high value-added jobs among young, skilled graduates.

Belarus Taking a Leading Position in IT in Eastern Europe

■ Dzmitry Halubnichy

Against the background of a difficult situation with energy resources, Belarus is strategically trying to focus its potential on the high-tech industry.

The consistent efforts of Belarus are bringing certain results, which is reflected in the system of international indices. According to the index of ICT development, estimated by the International Telecommunication Union, the Republic of Belarus was placed 32nd out of 175 countries and occupies a leading position in this indicator in the CIS region: According to the ICT development index, the Republic of Belarus is ahead of the Russian Federation (43rd place), Kazakhstan (52nd place), Azerbaijan (65th place), Moldova (59th place), and Ukraine (79th place). In 2018, the Republic of Belarus also climbed to 38th place in the United Nations E-Government Survey, moving up 11 places compared to the results of 2016. For the first time, Belarus moved to the group of countries (top 40) with a high index of e-government development. According to the index of electronic participation (e-Participation), which reflects the development of services for active communication between citizens and the state, Belarus rose to 33rd place. The improvement in comparison with 2016 was "plus" 43 positions.

The most promising high-tech project of Belarus is the High-Tech Park (HTP), established in 2005, which has become the

leading high-tech cluster in Eastern Europe and the CIS. On December 21, 2017, Lukashenka also signed the decree "On the development of the digital economy," which created special conditions for the development of the IT industry. At the end of 2019, the production volume of HTP amounted to over USD 2 billion demonstrating 162% growth. Currently, the Park employs about 61,000 people. This is 1.4% of those employed in the economy of Belarus and they produce 3.5% of GDP. The export of HTP is more than 20% of the total export of services in Belarus.

Thus, it is possible to say that Belarus is taking a leading position in Eastern Europe in this area and is ready to compete in the region in the field of high technologies due to the conditions the state created for the development of the IT industry and human capital.

Furthermore, having a national conception of informational security, by which Belarus declares the principles of informational neutrality and informational sovereignty, Belarus is also focused on the development of international digital initiatives, as evidenced by the initiative of the "belt of digital good-neighborliness" that aims to develop secure international space free of different kinds of informational interferences.

Georgia Should Reap the Benefits of the EU Digital Single Market on the Way to Digital Transformation

■ **David Tsiskaridze**

Can Georgia compete with the EU states in terms of ICT sector development?

The digital agenda is a key priority for the government of Georgia. The “Georgia 2020” Social Economic Development Strategy outlines several target areas to enhance the digital ecosystem, including High-Speed Broadband Internet for future development, e-Literacy and Capacity Building, Innovation and High-Tech, and e-Government.

The main question is how Georgia should transpose all the benefits from the EU Digital Single Market on the way to digital transformation. However, more actions are needed still to fully comply with the digital market requirements on the way to EU integration. Georgia should transpose all benefits of the Digital Single Market of the EU. The government should engage more actively in the improvement of governance and coordination by means of elaborating HDM policies, strategies, developing action plans in the relevant field, and creating national roadmaps to promote the development of the HDM ecosystem in Georgia.

Development of the digital economy and social potential in Georgia is supported by the EU to foster economic growth, increase the employment rate, improve the quality of life, and help businesses. The introduction of EU best practices will trigger faster development of mature ICT innovation and a start-up ecosystem supported by properly managed Georgian organizations. Researchers and innovative businesses will also benefit from gaining access to EU funding instruments.

More importantly, Georgia will develop a common legislative framework with the EU Digital Single Market that will provide better opportunities for sharing and creating new ideas with representatives of their field from different EU member states.

ICT Innovation is vital to economic development in the digital age. ICT plays an important part in the process of development of the Georgian economy. Georgia remains reliant on imports of ICT goods and services, but it is also expected to increase exports of services to adjacent markets in line with further market development. The penetration of telecommunication services has been growing, but there is still significant domestic demand to fill in before the country catches up with other countries in the region.

To shape the competitive ICT innovation ecosystem, the Georgian government should focus on assisting digital start-ups and SMEs to improve their access to finance, better reach to EU markets, and strengthen links with EU innovation ecosystems.

The EU4Digital Facility conducted a gap analysis for digital innovation of SMEs in EaP countries, which revealed the

main gap is access to finance for Georgia and Ukraine. SMEs can access finance in all phases of their lifecycle (creation, expansion, business transfer). Relevant aspects of the financial ecosystem and policy include regulatory sandboxes for alternative finance, crowdfunding, business angels, venture capital, fast track support for high-risk innovations, and funding of digital transformation of traditional enterprises.

What success stories can you name in e-government services?

One of the effective tools is the administration and management of multitiered government organizations and increasing their effectiveness by active use of electronic platforms. The one-stop portal, www.my.gov.ge, is an e-governance model providing users with various information and services. Electronic resources of the Georgian government are managed by the agency via the web portal, simplifying communication between government to citizens, government to employees, government to government, and government to business. The Data Exchange Agency (DEA) is tasked to manage the development of e-governance in Georgian government.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, citizen mobility has been restricted in Georgia, and a state of emergency was declared, as in many other countries in the world. Electronic state services have become highly demanded during this period.

The DEA, which operates under the status of LEPL (Legal Entity of Public Law) and is governed by the Ministry of Justice of Georgia, switched to remote work, completing the integration of more than 150 new electronic services into a unified portal of e-Services, www.my.gov.ge, which has allowed customers to receive several critical services without leaving home. Integrated services include primary and recurring certificates such as passport, identity, marriage, divorce, birth, death, adoption, paternity, name and/or surname change. The procedure for receiving existing services has also been optimized.

The Minister of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia has developed a centralized COVID-19 monitoring system that is updated twice a day, as well as other solutions like contact tracing through mobile app use (even though the user uptake on the mobile app was not as high as expected), and the highly effective and innovative practice of combining the e-prescription platform with the Georgian Post (national mail service) for medicine delivery to at-risk groups. Notably, e-prescription use has expanded beyond the Tbilisi area to all the country's regions.

Can you say that your country possesses strong human capital skilled in IT?

Digital skills are a key framework condition for the development of the digital economy and society. As digitization speeds up, the demand for digital skills grows in Georgia, as in other countries of the world. Citizens need adequate and appropriate digital skills to be empowered in a digital economy and society.

The following should be identified to foster sustainable, long-term growth and innovation in Georgia: existing gaps in digital skills, market trends, and requirements for ICT education and skills development. Education, training, and workforce advancement should be supported to develop and adapt its courses to meet the changing needs of the digital economy. The training aimed at fostering digital competence and digital skills is commonly believed to be the most appropriate tool to tackle the digital challenge. Modernization of our education and training systems for the digital age, bringing digital skills and competences to all levels of education and training are required.

The availability of digital skills should be expanded through the education and training system, while also preparing experts who will be able and willing to share their knowledge with others. Many of those experts are country expats who want to give back to their communities and will be able to engage with IT and educational communities to visit places and teach digital skills.

More young people should be educated and trained in digital professions so that we can create a large pool of talented, young, digital professionals, with increased female participation, ready to work, and take up the growing number of unfilled vacancies for ICT professionals in Georgia.

Georgia needs to up-skill and re-skill people with the digital skills as they need to remain productive in the jobs they have and become employable for new ones.

It is important to improve the digital skills of all citizens so that they can play an active role in modern society and strengthen social inclusion.

Moldova Lacks Incentives to Develop E-Government Services

■ Igor Girlea

Taking into account the small territory of the Republic of Moldova, it has significant potential to develop the ICT sector and digitize public services. Taking into account the aforementioned circumstances, I consider it possible for the Republic of Moldova, with the right push, to compete with the European member states on this matter.

Even though e-government has not shown some tangible improvements over the last years because of a lack of government will, technically e-government services can be used efficiently, but it is not popular for citizens and public

servants to use it, because there are no incentives presented by the state. In other words, the state should create the proper incentives for citizens and public workers to further develop e-government services.

Taking into account the fact that Moldova's IT parks were highly appreciated by the international community gathered in Poland at the CEE Business Summit and Awards in 2020, we can say that Moldova possesses strong human capital skilled in IT, but it must concentrate on creating the best environment to harvest the fruits of the mentioned skills.

Synergy between Human Capital in Ukraine and Financial Capital in the EU Will Increase Competitiveness of IT Projects

■ Ivan Nagornyak

Given the positive record of training in STEM subjects in post-Soviet countries and the latest success stories of ICT development in the region, do you think your country can compete with the EU states in terms of ICT sector development?

In my opinion, Ukraine and the EU should do everything so that they do not compete in the ICT sector but make Ukraine

an integral part of the EU's Digital Single Market, which is currently being created. Thus, they will avoid many problems that may arise in the future process of further European integration of Ukraine and gain a competitive advantage in the global market.

In particular, it will create better synergies between human capital in Ukraine and financial capital in the EU, which in the

long run will increase the competitiveness of such projects around the world.

In turn, the EU should stop being afraid to invest in Ukraine's IT industry, especially in those developments that may become necessary in the EU itself, given its ambitious plans to use artificial intelligence and 5G technologies.

What success stories can you name in e-government services?

The first and main success story is all the initiatives of the government of Ukraine, which deprived citizens of the need to stand in line to receive several administrative services. And in these reforms, the EU, by the way, often acted as a major donor.

An example is the Centers for Administrative Services, which were funded by the U-LEAD program as part of the decentralization reform.

Also, the government of Ukraine recently launched the ACTION (Дія) application, which allowed Ukrainians to use electronic driver's licenses and ID cards.

In general, the implementation of the relevant EU directives, which have allowed the introduction of electronic trustee services in Ukraine, and the movement toward their mutual recognition between Ukraine and the EU is also a great success story.

Can you say that your country possesses strong human capital skilled in IT?

To answer this question, one should go to the StartupBlink website, which is a ranking of the best countries for start-ups.

Ukraine ranks 29th. At the same time, Kyiv took 32nd place among the cities of the world and entered the top 10 European cities, taking 8th place.

This means that the IT sector is extremely dynamic in Ukraine. Small and medium-sized enterprises that provide IT services to international companies can now be found in almost every regional center of Ukraine. Previously, such a scale was quite difficult to even imagine.

It is also worth mentioning the European integration reforms that contribute to the development of this sector, in particular in the field of financial services, as well as the protection of intellectual property. Ukraine is already making progress in implementing the Association Agreement in these sectors, but to support the start-up ecosystem and expand Ukrainian IT companies' access to EU markets, the authorities should pay more attention to this process.

Enhancement of the IT sector in the Eastern Partnership

In 2020, the EU has been active in establishing a number of initiatives concerning the enhancement of the IT sector in Eastern Partnership countries.

Thus, EU4Digital launched a new activity to support women mentorship programs in the tech sector in the EaP countries.



Digital Skills Programs Are Crucial for the Development of the Real and Financial Sector in Armenia

■ **Hakob Hakobyan and Heghine Aleksanyan**

Do you consider such programs to be timely in the post-pandemic period?

In this regard, pre-, during, or post-pandemic periods are the same, in a sense that, even without this external shock, the sooner digital transformation takes place, the better. Given the complementary nature of the digital sector, the programs aimed at the enhancement of digital skills in society are crucial for the development of the real and financial sector, as well as for government and NGOs. And especially taking into account that the IT sector has great potential for economic growth even during the pandemic and the post-pandemic recovery period, while in many other fields, people started to perceive their jobs to be insecure because of the possibility of redundancies or store closure, and as a result of perceptions of the difficulty of finding alternative employment.

From this perspective, the launch of a women mentorship program in the tech sector in Armenia and the EaP countries can work more effectively as the current difficulties can be an additional incentive for people to take “risk” and find a better position in the labor market, with a higher wage and a professional position. On the other hand, of course, there is a risk that the necessity of finding alternative employment will change people’s attitudes toward the instrumental perception of the job when people lose their interest in the job/profession perceiving it only as a means of satisfaction of their financial needs. This can result in a weak work ethic and will lower their commitment to new programs that may open new opportunities for them.

As for the targeted approach regarding women, it is important also to consider the country’s social and economic aspects, national variations in employment patterns, and lifestyle choices, as such choices are not made in a vacuum. Of course, today, choices are open to women in the sense that a majority of women in Armenia have choices in terms of education and employment but such factors as preferences toward work-family balance and many other country-level and Individual-level variables affect their options, and such factors can also condition women’s involvement level in the tech sector or programs directed to this path. On the other hand, mentorship programs for women can succeed as from all the mentioned variables, education’s effect is a significant one, especially for those who are at the beginning of their career.

Have you noticed the rising need for digital technologies to support the response to the pandemic consequences in your country?

The need for digital technologies and skills necessary for their use is, without any doubt, needed during the pandemic and, as a consequence, during the lockdown. It may be argued that enhancement is needed with respect to skills, especially among adults, who otherwise are not using digital technologies as intensively in their profession, as the younger generation. Although, as a whole, Armenia’s increasingly significant IT agenda creates a good environment for the development of the potential of the digital economy and society.

Development of the Digital Economy Should be One of the Priorities for Azerbaijan in the Pandemic Period

■ **Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu**

Do you consider such programs to be timely in the post-pandemic period?

A new activity of EU4Digital to support women mentorship programs in the tech sector in the EaP countries may be considered appropriate for Azerbaijan. This can be especially beneficial during the pandemic. However, the biggest problem with Azerbaijan’s ICT sector is the lack of competition there. According to official data, about 65% of the country’s internet market is controlled by state providers, such as Aztelekom, Baktelecom, and Azercell. The share of these three companies in the retail internet market is over 65%. Due to the state’s monopoly on the internet market, its tariffs are high, and its quality is low. Therefore, market liberalization through the privatization of state-owned companies is even more critical.

Have you noticed the rising need for digital technologies to support the response to the pandemic consequences in your country?

I think the role of technology will increase in the post-pandemic period. In this context, the digital economy’s development should be one of the priorities for the Azerbaijan economy’s modernization. E-services (including e-commerce) can play an essential role in ensuring a faster and secure digital transition. In Azerbaijan, men still occupy the highest positions in the IT sector. Therefore, increasing women’s access to the digital economy and the digital industry can contribute to gender equality in the IT sector.

Digital Transformation Strategy in Georgia Should Be Adopted along With a Recovery Strategy

■ Mariam Sumbadze

Do you consider such programs timely in the post-pandemic period? Have you noticed the rising need for digital technologies to support the response to the pandemic consequences in your country?

Technologies and innovation provide a great opportunity for Eastern Partnership countries that are pursuing their path toward growth and development to create a healthy, transparent, and profitable environment for businesses, start-ups, and foreign investors, as well as for citizens. “Together for resilient, sustainable and integrated economies” and “Together toward a resilient digital transformation” has been part of the EaP Development strategy which brings us directly to enhancing the tech sector. By supporting legislative changes, financial aid, and applying best practices, this approach allows for better access to digital infrastructure and services, better public services and administration for citizens, the extension of broadband infrastructures especially in regions and local areas, and a strengthened e-governance. Georgia has chosen the path to interfere and connect with the digital enhancement strategy and become one of the driving forces for implementation and partnership. Within this initiative, lots of partnership and collaboration has been established involving EU and EaP countries, which directly allows us to have the business growth opportunities at hand. However, when it comes to state aid, the EU Commission allows more flexibility in the EU state aid rules. The assistance and support programs are widely distributed to the partner states and bring more value to the partner state SMEs. A lot has been done since 2015 in harmonizing EU Digital markets to EaP countries, and the pattern must continue growing. These initiatives must address the unjustified restrictions and rules in regards to data exchange within EU and EaP countries to ensure that the IT sector doesn't have their hands tied to extend and attract more collaborations, as the beauty of the tech community is that it is global.

A knowledge-based economy driven by technologies and innovation has been the focal point for development in Georgia for last couple of years. Collaborating with different international organizations and working together with European and East European countries is the essential starting point for future successful growth. EU4Digital, regardless of the challenging pandemic situation, has had a significant impact by bringing the International Digital community together in Georgia and once again contributed to putting Georgia on the map of digital transformation. The ongoing pandemic situation has attracted attention for information technologies, while field representatives have been strongly aware of the advantages the IT sector brings, other businesses and regular citizens have also been attracted and involved in large-scale digital transformation. Despite many

uncertainties posed by the pandemic, there are clearly two major imperatives between which our further actions must be balanced — the physical security of people and the provision of their living environment. It is critical to focus on the current situation to be able to develop and implement a reasonable, effective, and efficient adaptation-recovery strategy alongside the adoption of digital transformation strategies, which have become inseparable. While speaking of businesses, it has also been shown that transformation shall involve not only enriching pre-pandemic process technologies, but also requires transforming the business model, all its components step-by-step and moving toward more tech-savvy and digital-friendly models. We, as a Georgian ICT Cluster, together with our member companies, who have more than 20 years of experience on the market, are open for collaborations and looking forward to future partnership and cooperation opportunities to tackle the recent difficulties after the pandemic has changed the world scenario by becoming the top Digital Transformation and go-to partner for local and international SMEs and organizations.

Harnessing the talents on the tech market, supporting and advocating for women in tech is a big challenge for the international community. The World Economic Forum states that empowering women globally can bring USD 28 trillion in GDP growth within the next seven years. Women create big and profitable businesses; as evidenced by the current boom in Femtech, women control 60% of the finances and make 80% of the purchasing decisions. Femtech has become the next big thing, however, having diversity with both women and men represented equally in every business is the key to creating a successful business and product. The way we see how to attract more women in tech stand on working with associations and initiatives that promote gender diversity and creating a strategy for future enhancements. Planning specific campaigns or supporting more female candidates for tech role openings and supporting educational programs, which promotes diversity in tech, will create the base for development and growth.

The mentorship program by EU4Digital is a wonderful and strong way to increase the number of women in the tech community and women in entrepreneurship, to show successful and well-known women in tech who, regardless of difficulties and gender bias, have been able to make their voices heard and now are ready to assist the next generation pursue their tech careers. The stereotypes about being a woman in computing still exist, therefore the change begins from this starting point where we change the vision so that young girls see themselves in tech careers, and as they say, “When one woman helps, another wonderful thing happens.”

People in Moldova Expect Digitalization of Public Services amid the Pandemic

■ Igor Girlea

Do you consider such programs to be timely in the post-pandemic period?

Indeed, everybody noticed the rising need for digital technologies amid the pandemic. More than that, the pandemic showed Eastern Partnership countries the real benefit that IT development can bring to a country. Even

though Moldova is one of the most developed countries in the region in terms of e-governance, the pandemic showed that the level of digital technologies implementation in public services is lower than people would expect and provoked discussions on fast implementation of all the possible IT solutions in public services.

Ukraine Was Not Prepared for a Rapid Shift Online; High Level of IT Skills Becomes a Must

■ Alina Shcherbyna

Do you consider such programs to be timely in the post-pandemic period?

Today, many entrepreneurs have moved their businesses online. It is possible that such a growing trend of “transition” of business from offline, will continue after the quarantine, and, as a result, society will receive remote access to services that it could only dream of before. But at the same time, both business and employees faced a number of problems: cybersecurity, the transition of employees to remote work, new control and optimization systems, and most important — it has become a must to have a high level of IT skills to get a decent job.

Programs such as EU4Digital are helping citizens and markets embrace and adapt to the new world of digital technology. Unfortunately, the Ukrainian realities were not ready for such a rapid transition to an online format, such important areas suffered most: medicine, education, and infrastructure. Outdated technologies in organizations and the low level of IT skills of people are felt more and more sharply due to the disproportionate level of economic development of regions in our country. Now every large business, in conjunction with government and international programs, should contribute to the harmonization of digital structures in society in various areas.

Have you noticed the rising need for digital technologies to support the response to the pandemic consequences in your country?

During the pandemic, Ukraine, like other countries, moved to live and work online, but our realities showed how unprepared Ukrainians are. In all our projects, we began to use the simple programs to communicate with our clients: Zoom, Google Meet. But even the installation became a problem for some people. Going beyond the borders of Kyiv city and large regional cities, as well as beyond the age range of 35–40 years, we observe very low computer skills.

According to the Ministry of Digital Science, 37.9% of Ukrainians aged 18-70 have digital skills below the basic level. At the same time, there is a simple pattern: the lower the level of digital competencies, the less desire to get new skills. Conversely, a higher level of digital skills increases the level of learning and expanding of their skills.

Due to the quarantine, there was a demand and need to develop and increase competencies; now it is about information, education, and the creation of infrastructure. In our projects, we work with children and women and, on our own, we create free educational projects, webinars, and other initiatives to enable everyone to adapt to the new post-pandemic realities.



EU 4 Gender Equality: Together Against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence

In July 2020, the UN Women and UN Population Fund, together with the EU have launched a three-year regional program to tackle gender stereotypes and gender-based violence in six countries of the Eastern Partnership: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The program, **"EU 4 Gender Equality: Together Against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence,"** ultimately seeks to strengthen equal rights and opportunities for women and men by challenging perceptions about men's and women's roles in the family and in society and working to eliminate gender-based violence.

Women’s Right to Equality Becoming More Accepted as a Social Norm in Armenia

■ Narine Petrosyan and Heghine Aleksanyan

How can you describe the gender-based issues in your country, is there any gender inequality (i.e., gender pay gap, gender-stereotyped behavior including men’s non-involvement in parenting and domestic responsibilities, gender-based violence, etc.)?

Recently, women’s involvement in the labor market in Armenia has increased, but men’s involvement in housework has not increased proportionally. Both the individual characteristics and the country-level features are playing a role here.

Regarding country-level characteristics, we should take into account cultural factors, such as religious traditions and behavior as well as institutional ones as they both have a huge impact on the equal share of housework within the household. On the one hand, the Armenian Apostolic Church teaches through marriage rituals that women are directly subordinate to men, and they should obey and perform first as mothers and housekeepers. On the other hand, especially during the Soviet era, these non-egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles were reconstructed, and women’s involvement in the labor market was expanded.

In terms of institutional regulations, Armenia has signed international conventions on gender equality and has recently drafted the updated Gender Equality Strategy 2019–2023 that articulates its priorities and way forward to mainstream gender across diverse sectors. Generally, women’s right to equality is not only enshrined in law but is becoming more accepted as a social norm.

Currently, both women and men in Armenia view paid work as an essential means to provide for a family and/or to have a desired lifestyle. Nevertheless, because of the factors mentioned above, the bulk of women are still either “home-centered,” prioritizing home over paid work, or “adaptive,” attempting to combine home and children with paid work. However, this may not mean that men are not “home-centered” as their “home centeredness” can be expressed by the engagement in full-time work first of all because of providing for their families. Although at the same time, it seems that time is not the most

decisive factor that influences the sharing of domestic work in Armenia, and woman’s employment may not significantly reduce the difference between women and men with the respect to time allocated to housework.

Do you expect the program to ensure gender equality in your country, what results can be achieved within three years of its implementation?

According to the data presented by the Armenian Statistical Committee, by December 2019, women’s labor force participation was lower than that of men, with just over half (51.4%) of women of working age participating in the labor force, compared with 70.6% of men. Women are more likely to work in part-time positions than men (34% vs. 18%). Unemployment is high among young women (aged 15–24) at 45%, compared with 33.3% of men in the same age group. Women are underrepresented in management positions. Although they are more likely to pursue university degrees than men, only an estimated one in five small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have a woman owner.

One of the main factors that “contribute” to this picture in Armenia is the occupational stereotypes that in turn influence the education choices of both women and men. In the education sector, men are more likely to enter technical vocational education, while women are more likely to pursue university degrees in the fields of health, social science, or education. Women are more likely to choose careers that are associated with traditional female roles and allow them to fulfill their family responsibilities. That’s why they lack ambitions for professional advancement. Taking into account that the “EU 4 Gender Equality: Together Against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence” program aims also to foster and empower both women and men to pursue their chosen path in life, equally participate in and lead society, it may help to tackle gender-segregated educational/occupational choices, but the chosen strategy should be delivered taking into account the cultural context and customs of the country, otherwise it may not be effective.

Women Continue to Face Gender-Based Restrictions in Azerbaijan

■ Shahla Ismayil

How can you describe the gender-based issues in your country, is there any gender inequality (i.e., gender pay gap, gender-stereotyped behavior including men’s non-involvement in parenting and domestic responsibilities, gender-based violence etc.)?

Women’s rights in Azerbaijan are quite a debated topic — on the one hand, universal suffrage was introduced in Azerbaijan in 1918 by the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, making Azerbaijan the first Muslim-majority country ever to enfranchise women, and women nominally enjoy the same

legal rights as men in modern Azerbaijan. On the other hand, women continue to face countless gender-based restrictions, deeply rooted in patriarchal attitudes, traditional social norms, and strict gender stereotypes in Azerbaijan. Consequently, gender-based inequalities continue to exist in education, employment, political participation, access to information and communication technologies. Despite the existence of a legislative basis for gender equality, there largely exist attitudinal barriers to women's representation in decision-making positions at all levels. Strong gender-biases and gender roles also dominate at the household level — the disproportional involvement of men in parenting and domestic responsibilities is invoked by a major influence of the traditional society. Traditional female professions, mostly in low-paid job sectors, as well as over 600 banned job titles for women, lead to a number of negative consequences including a gender pay gap. A new wave of female disadvantages, such as early marriages, sex-selective abortions, trafficking in women, and gender-based violence reoccur in modern Azerbaijan.

Do you expect the program to ensure gender equality in your country, what results can be achieved within three years of its implementation?

The program “EU 4 Gender Equality: Together Against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence” has a strong potential to support policy changes in EaP countries targeted at enhancing women's legal rights in political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Yet, it is not likely to be equally effective in all six countries for a number of factors mostly related to the status quo of good governance and democratization progress.

In Azerbaijan, the poor human rights context and damaged justice sector in combination with the lack of a favorable operational environment for civil society and media significantly worsens the overall picture, making the country unfavorable and undemocratic enough to promote gender equality. As a result of the restricted civic space and legal environment, the financial viability, infrastructure, organizational capacities, advocacy, service provision, and public image of all civil society organizations, including women's organizations, were largely affected. Consequently, the number of women's participation in public-political processes has been minimized, and the women's rights agenda has been largely distressed in the last 6 years. Therefore, intensified efforts are required to promote women's rights and gender equality in Azerbaijan, and the participation of a viable, independent civil society in this process is an absolute requirement.

Gender Equality is Nonexistent in Belarus

■ Nina Vaisman

How can you describe the gender-based issues in your country, is there any gender inequality (i.e., gender pay gap, gender-stereotyped behavior including men's non-involvement in parenting and domestic responsibilities, gender-based violence etc.)?

Here in Belarus gender equality doesn't exist. We face the same issues as all CIS countries do: no working law against domestic violence, payment gap (women earn on average about 25% less than men), a list of banned professions for women, some employment spheres are considered “women only.” For example, the vast majority of people in educational spheres are women, they are widely represented in low positions and often in middle management, but all the positions in top management (university rectors, ministers, etc.) are occupied by men.

Despite the fact that during the Soviet times women received certain “rights,” in the real life it formed a stereotype that women are not only supposed to work “in a line” with men, but also they have to cover all the domestic chores that are considered “women only”: cleaning, washing, taking care of kids, and so on. Moreover, a few years ago it was quite common (I've heard it from several women myself) — that

“men's salary — is his money, and with women's salary I have to pay for our food, buy everything for our kid, and if something remains I can spend it on myself”

But I hope that the situation is changing now — more and more husbands and fathers are taking more responsibility, sharing chores, and getting more involved in parenting. I believe the last few years of feminism spreading around the world has an influence on Belarusian women as well — they become more attentive to their lives, self-respect, and personal boundaries. The younger generation doesn't take seriously old stereotypes like “you have to get married to be happy,” “you have to deliver a baby before 25” or a “woman's vocation is to inspire her man.”

So, I believe it is extremely important to continue informing the masses — both men and women — for building a healthy civil society. Gender equality is a must for a highly developed and educated society — and Belarus is moving fast in this direction, we witnessed it for the whole of 2020. So, it will also help to develop every sphere (like economics, education, healthcare, arts, etc.) and enhance the growth and contribution of women to these spheres.

Georgia Misses Policy to Promote Gender Equality

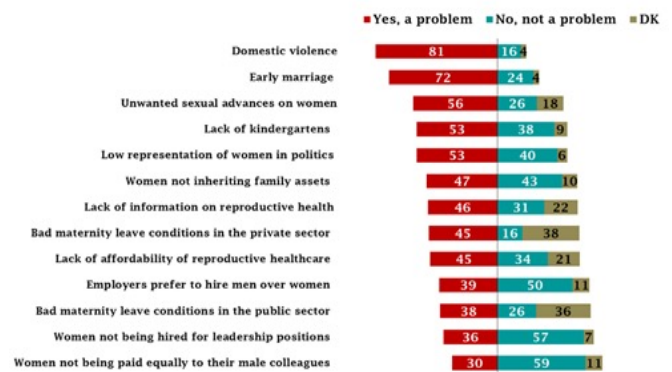
■ Teona Kupunia

Women face a plethora of cultural, professional, and societal barriers to equal participation in all aspects of life in Georgia. Domestic violence remains a persistent and widespread problem, and the number of femicides is high. Gender stereotypes and patriarchy perpetuate the belief that women are primarily caretakers. There is a 36% pay gap in Georgia between women and men, and the state does not have a concrete vision/policy to minimize/close the gap.

Violence against women remains one of the major challenges for women in Georgia. According to the National Democratic Institute’s December 2017 poll, when asked what are the major issues faced by women in Georgia, 81% of the respondents named domestic violence, which was followed by early marriages (72%) and sexual harassment (56%).¹

Women are significantly underrepresented in decision-making levels in government, business, and elected office. Women hold only 15% of seats in parliament. The picture is worse in local government, where only one out of 64 mayors and 13% of the 2,058 local council (sakrebulo) members are women. As such, more than half the population has a minimal voice in decision-making and the policies affecting their lives. Legislation is written by men, based on men’s analyses of needs and priorities, and without any assessment of its impact on women.

Do the following currently represent a problem for women in Georgia, or not? (q44)



Source: National Democratic Institute

Gender equality, however, is ensured on the legislative level. New amendments introduced to the Constitution of Georgia mandate the state to ensure equal rights and opportunities for men and women and provide new guarantees for substantive gender equality.

I hope the new program will be able to support achieving substantive gender equality in Georgia. Education and raising awareness play crucial roles in changing public attitudes toward a myriad of issues, including those that may seem controversial at first.

Ukraine Should Make Greater Efforts toward Gender Equality

■ Maryna Shevtsova

How can you describe the gender-based issues in your country, is there any gender inequality (i.e., gender pay gap, gender-stereotyped behavior including men’s non-involvement in parenting and domestic responsibilities, gender-based violence etc.)?

On the one hand, Ukraine has quite a good legal foundation to ensure gender equality. Gender equality is guaranteed by the Constitution and by the law on prevention and combatting discrimination. There is even a separate law aimed at ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women. However, based on the recent surveys’ results, when it comes to the implementation of these legal acts, there is much room for improvement. For example, according to

data from the United Nations Development Program , the average gender payment gap across the country is around 21% (reaching 50% and even 70% in regions like Dnipro or Donetsk respectively). Women spend 29 hours per week on unpaid housework compared to 15 hours in the case of men. And while the current parliament is proud of the highest number of women among its members for the whole history of independent Ukraine, women still represent only 20% of the MPs (88 female MPs out of 423). Furthermore, gender-based violence remains a huge problem for the country where 2 out of 3 women have suffered from psychological, physical, or sexual violence, and every second women has faced sexual harassment at least in one form. At the same time, because

¹ https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_December_2017_POLITICAL_ENG_final.pdf

of strong opposing votes of conservative and religious groups, the Ukrainian parliament still has not ratified the Istanbul Convention to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence, which, I believe, is a very good illustration of what is going on in the country.

Do you expect the program to ensure gender equality in your country, what results can be achieved within three years of its implementation?

The program description sounds very promising and ambitious as the plan is to collaborate both with the government and civil society organizations. Ukraine by now has quite a few NGOs working on gender equality and women's rights that are active in different regions, and I am positive that their experience and knowledge will make a valuable contribution to the program. The fact that the focus is on social discourse, perceptions, and practices in the participating countries

creates potential for bringing real transformations at different levels of the society. My main fear, though, is related with the implementation of the program. It is not a rare case that our politicians express enthusiasm and eagerness to participate in EU-led programs, yet the impact and outcomes of those are very insignificant and limited to declarations and memoranda of intentions. There is a clear need for more watchdog practices and monitoring mechanisms that would allow the program officers to see real-time progress. For that, obviously, very clear indicators for each year of the program should be set and sanctions developed that could be put into action if the indicators are not achieved on time. Among such indicators could be female participation/representation in certain positions, the number of gender-violence cases investigated by the police, awareness raising campaign results, mentorship programs for women in leadership, and so forth.

Image source: metamorworks / shutterstock.com



- /Administration
- /Human Resources
- /Legal
- /Accounting
- /Finance
- /Marketing
- /Publicity

Reducing the Digital Divide

The EU's EaPConnect program aims to bring together research and education communities from the EU and Eastern Partnership countries and to reduce the digital divide. The project will extend network infrastructure to scale up scientific exchange across borders, offer new services to enhance international R&E cooperation, strengthen national research and education networks in R&E ecosystems, and build knowledge, skills, and collaborative working through events, training, and other initiatives.

Armenia Lacks Quality Tech Education System

■ Vahan V. Yeghiazaryan

Does IT education in your country require further improvement? Do you think this program can bring tangible results for strengthening IT education in your country? Can the community of IT specialists be considered not only a professional association but also an important element of civil society in your country?

Armenia was one of the main “Silicon Valleys” of the USSR. Twenty-five percent of the population of Soviet Armenia worked in innovative industries. During the dramatic 1990s, Armenian innovation and IT potential collapsed, and at the beginning of the 21st century, the Armenian IT industry had less than 100,000 specialists. In the last 20 years, the IT industry in Armenia has developed rapidly and has a lot of success stories like the establishment of PicsArt and so on, but at the same time there are three main problems.

First of all, there is a huge gap between the educational system and the needs of Armenian IT companies. Almost all Armenian IT companies face problems when looking for good specialists. The second biggest problem is the number of IT start-ups emerging every year. This indicator is low and shows that the Armenian IT industry doesn't have enough qualified representatives from the new generation of Armenian technological entrepreneurs, and this is a very worrying issue. The third one is the problem of

sustainable growth of businesses. We can see a lot of Armenian IT companies that have been developed from start-ups to successful small companies, but after that, there is a problem of further developing business and reaching mid-size level. The reasons for this problem indicate the need for a special education program for business developers and CEOs of this kind of company. All these problems cannot be solved only by the professional community of IT specialists but should be solved by civil society, especially by youth and entrepreneurial NGOs that can involve and organize educational programs for the new generation of future programmers, business developers, and entrepreneurs who can build a new type of Armenian economy.

Our organization — Zargatsum (Development) social movement has extensive experience in organizing educational forums for young Armenian specialists, especially in the field of e-commerce, and based on this experience, we can say with certainty that Armenian youth is very interested in programming and technical business development. Thus, the lack of such kinds of projects only hampers the development of this industry in Armenia.

Armenia holds a unique position between the Eurasian Economic Union and the EU, North and South, East and West, and has all opportunities to fulfill its huge potential and restore the name of Silicon Valley in the region.

IT Education in Georgia Needs Radical Transformation

■ David Kiziria

Does IT education in your country require further improvement?

IT education in Georgia needs a radical transformation to meet the challenges posed by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the acceleration of the pandemic.

On the one hand, every year thousands of IT specialists graduate from universities and great attention is paid to the development of IT professional programs. Nevertheless, representatives of the IT industry note the shortage of IT specialists, both in terms of quantity and quality.

The demand for qualified IT specialists is further enhanced by the challenges of the digital transformation accelerated by the pandemic — in a “next normal,” IT specialists must be one of the key drivers of economic growth success in the post-pandemic era.

The quality of formal education IT programs is just the tip of the iceberg of problems. One of the important factors is the underdevelopment of the IT ecosystem, the market in Georgia, and the monopoly of state providers in this field.

International practice shows:

The level of stimulation and quality of IT education is greatly influenced by the development of the IT industry in the country, as it is the industry that is the customer and employer of IT education graduates.

The development of the IT industry directly depends on the opportunities offered by the local market in the first place. Would it be small Estonia or the industry leader — Silicon Valley — in all cases, affordable funding and local space to pilot IT products are needed.

In the absence of such an ecosystem, success can be a “point” in nature and contribute to the “drainage of the mind.” Consequently, appropriate systemic transformations are important for the development of IT education. The problem is also the underdevelopment of the nonformal education system in the country, both for the young generation (circles and clubs) and for adults (short-term courses), which would be a wonderful solution for future developments.

Do you think this program can bring tangible results for strengthening IT education in your country?

EaPConnect, which aims to facilitate the internationalization of IT education and research communities, will have a significant positive impact if implemented wisely.

Due to the IT and innovation ecosystem in the country, the underdevelopment of the market, and the dominance of state providers in this field, IT activities are mainly focused on: (1) the integration tasks of imported technologies; (2) customization of these systems to local requirements; (3) the replacement of imported systems with local analogs, the success of which is largely ensured by the low price achieved at the expense of functional limitations; also, (4) outsourcing, which again does not go through narrow technical tasks. All other cases are only spotty in nature and do not actually affect the climate.

Given that Georgia is only a superficial consumer of technological knowledge, the degree of backwardness only progresses, which naturally has a severe impact on the future of our society.

EaPConnect can at least facilitate the development of personal or institutional expertise and contacts in the field of technology through internationalization, which will be an important start.

However, implementation of this project could have been an aid in the transformation of modern mechanisms in this field.

It would be good in this direction, for example:

Select a research topic that aligns with both global and local challenges. Enables the development of its results after on-site piloting and subsequent export.

Encourage public-private partnership mechanisms. This may not be direct funding of projects by the state, but rather the creation of opportunities by it to reduce the monopolies of IT agencies of state agencies, where the commercial products created as a result of R&D will be used.

The existence of such a competitive environment would encourage the activity of non-state commercial and academic providers in the field of R&D and the formation of long-term, stable mechanisms.

Can the community of IT specialists be considered not only a professional association but also an important element of civil society in your country?

Naturally, an IT specialist, like any other professional, considers themselves a part of their community, a responsible member. IT professionals, at the heart of their work, are at the epicenter of global technological change, seeing and feeling the transformations: opportunities or risks that these new realities create. Based on this expertise, they can play an important role in the digital transformation of their own societies, which not only involves technology, but it also involves more in-depth, paradigm shift changes that encompass all aspects of society.

History shows that the advent of new industrial revolutions causes tectonic upheavals: It gives trained societies a chance to move forward, the unprepared ones are plunged into a whirlpool of sociopolitical and economic collapses, and their backwardness increases.

The challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution were exacerbated by the new reality created by the pandemic, and in our case, the global challenges are compounded by local circumstances — our post-Soviet legacy (underdeveloped civil, political, and economic systems, internal conflicts, occupation).

Consolidation of public potential is important to deal with these. The development of the IT industry has been largely due to the openness-based nature of the IT community. The open-source model, marginal before, is now mainstream today.

The IT community has the potential to become a trigger for change. A good example of this is open-source projects developed by the IT community during the Ukrainian Revolution (public procurement system, blockchain system of state auctions), of which I was a direct and active participant. Based on the open-source approach, several organizations have been merged since the 2020 elections to develop and offer a modern technology-based electoral system to the public. Our platform (Open Election Systems) integrates both IT and civil and academic sectors. We think this will be a good example of public activity.

IT Community Influences Political Agenda in Moldova

■ Igor Girlea

Does IT education in your country require further improvement? Do you think this program can bring tangible results for strengthening IT education in your country? Can the community of IT specialists be considered not only a professional association but also an important element of civil society in your country?

Unfortunately, even though the IT education system is one of the most efficient in Moldova, it needs an upgrade through, first, structural changes of the educational institutes and, second, adjustment of the curricula to the current challenges and requirements of the IT world. So, in these circumstances, definitely, this program, if properly implemented in Moldova, will bring some benefits to the IT community of Moldova,

especially because of the experience exchange that this proposes.

More than that, taking into account that our culture is still highly influenced by the Soviet way of thinking, this program would allow a great part of the IT community to explore the European culture in their field of activity.

There is no doubt that the IT community can be and is

more than just a professional association. Nowadays, the IT community influences the political agenda more than other professionals because of the massive use of political technologies on social-media platforms. The recent results of the presidential elections in Moldova prove that the IT community influences politics, and society thus needs to be highly responsible regarding societal issues.

IT Education in Ukraine Should Be Based on Practice, Not Just Theory

■ Alina Shcherbyna

Does IT education in your country require further improvement? Do you think this program can bring tangible results for strengthening IT education in your country? Can the community of IT specialists be considered not only a professional association but also an important element of civil society in your country?

The education system of the country, as a whole, is based on the theory that students lack practical skills and they have to acquire these themselves, in parallel with their studies. The same applies to IT education, which should largely be based on practice. We have much to develop; there is much to be

scaled because our professionals are highly valued in the international market.

Joining the EU4Digital program will allow us to step further in this direction, create new jobs in the digital industry in the future, and develop research in the field of information technology and start-ups. This is a chance for the new generation, and for the students of Code Club Ukraine to become a part of the future.

IT professionals are forming a new community that is different from others. This is not only a professional association but also a conscious part of civil society with a high level of responsibility and a firm life position.

Independent Media and Civil Society Development

In December 2020, Josep Borrell, Vice-President of the European Commission took part in a European Parliament plenary debate on the recent developments in the Eastern Partnership countries. In his remarks, Mr. Borrell said he considers civil society and independent media in EaP countries as effective tools in increasing democratic resilience and tackling corruption.

“Strengthening resilience is the main objective and core element of the future Eastern Partnership policy. We will work with partners on five areas of resilience— economic, democratic, environmental, digital, and societal. I think it is key to empower civil society and independent media to increase accountability, to expose corruption, and to enhance critical thinking,” he added.



In Armenia the Level of Civil Society Development is Higher Than That of Politics

■ **Vahan V. Yeghiazaryan**

How do you assess the degree of independent media and civil society development in your country?

Armenia is a young democracy. It has taken a new shape after the Velvet Revolution in April — May 2018. The current Armenian democracy is very authentic. It unites the European classic democratic values and Soviet heritage of strength, authoritarian, and socialist values; conservative values of the East and neo-liberal values from the West; and a strategic alliance with Russia and strategic partnership with the EU and Iran. All these aspects affect the national character and make civil society and media industry very diverse.

In the case of civil society, there is a lot of research that shows that the average educational level of young civil society activists is higher than that of young, political party activists. That indicator shows that the level of civil society development is comparatively higher than the level of development of political parties. On the other hand, Armenian civil society suffered a post-revolutionary crisis when a lot of civil society activists moved to governmental structures. But at the same time, there are a lot of very good, specialized NGOs that work hard in their sub-industry and create additional value for society, for example, during the Second Karabakh War there were a lot of brilliant projects aimed at supporting Artsakh, refugees, the Army, and even projects aimed at saving stray dogs in the conflict area. The greater part of that job has been done by Armenian NGOs, for example “Info Artsakh,” which was a media project launched by Zargatsum social movement. At the same time, industry strongly depends on European, Russian, or political funding. Only several dozens of NGOs are really independent and work based on their pure ideology and values. Half of these NGOs are in Yerevan, and others are spread in the regions.

The situation with media is worse. Almost all Armenian large and medium-size media have a political orientation toward the political opposition or governing party, Russia, or the West. That really divides society and does not allow to unify the nation based on one common vision. That is the root of democratic pluralism and at the same time the root of national division and weakening. That is the contradictory soul of the democracy that exists in Armenia, authentically.

Do civil society and media independence influence the fight against corruption in your country?

Society and the media have their important role in the fight against corruption. But in Armenia this phenomenon has its own identity. The main part of current anti-corruption activities is based on the system of effective checks and balances. The political opposition has its own media and NGOs, and the governing party has the same tools as well. So, if a civil servant or someone else goes beyond their mandate, the system of checks and balances starts working and tries to show the violation of law or corruption, attempts to criticize their political opponents, and take advantage of the situation.

That is the main aspect right now that supports the fight against corruption and brings benefits for our society. To summarize, Armenian civil society is well developed and needs only non-political funding, for example, from the Armenian diaspora around the world. In turn, Armenian media are very dependent on the political industry, and this affects their target audience, rating, and so on. There is a lack of independent media that can present the truth or do not have any ties with political processes. The Armenian media industry has a long path to reach the desired level of development.

Civil Society Suffers from Limitations in Azerbaijan

■ **Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu**

How do you assess the degree of independent media and civil society development in your country?

Civil society and media organizations in Azerbaijan have weak organizational capacities and little public support. Independent civil society was abolished due to the pressure of the repressive authority of Azerbaijan through the mobilization of resources that are crucial to the activities of NGOs. Instead of real civil society institutions that were once a part of the global and national dialogue platforms, these authorities are very active in filling the places with NGOs that are dependent and controlled

by the state’s financial resources. Independent NGOs have been fragmented and weakened in Azerbaijan due to increasing legal and practical barriers that hinder the activities of an independent civil society. Thus, independent civil society institutions in these countries have faced severe difficulties in implementing their organizational missions. Therefore, to get out of the situation, they have acted in various ways and have chosen different tactics to survive and maintain their immediate existence, not as long-term strategic plans. Thus, a group of independent NGO leaders from Azerbaijan has been

forced to leave the country and live in exile. While some of them are currently active, most of them have either changed their occupation or generally stopped their activities. While other independent NGOs remain in the country, they temporarily suspend their actions to maintain their reputation and remain passive, insured from possible effects. Finally, the latter group of independents did not keep up the pressure by changing their positions and acting among government-oriented NGOs within the government's boundaries.

Do civil society and media independence influence the fight against corruption in your country?

The prevalence of wide-ranging national problems in Azerbaijan, like a high level of corruption and an imitation of the democratic institutions, has considerably narrowed the overall public-political circle in the country. Over the past six years, the Azerbaijani authorities have created more concrete problems to hinder local and foreign NGOs' activities and prevent their total development. These problems are the following:

- The current legislation has restricted the scope of their activities by applying legal measures.
- The public image of NGOs was deliberately damaged through running regular anti-campaigns in the state-run media outlets, and their access to the electorate has diminished.
- The geography of their activities was narrowed; access to the regions was restricted through administrative tools and employment of full control mechanisms.
- The recycling process of cadres was weakened due to an influx of experts to other (business and academic) sectors. Reproductions were decreased as well as due to an absence of specialized personnel, and educational and practical skills were not able to complement each other.
- Legitimacy has been restricted; the flow of new NGOs into the sector has been blocked through existing legislation and the centralized regulatory means.

- Involvement of volunteers has been restricted by legislation, and their contributions have been reduced.
- Due to the absence of financial sustainability, jobs were cut and skilled cadres abandoned NGOs.
- An internal cooperation culture and practices of NGOs have declined; and solidarity, mutual trust, and healthy competition among NGOs were not formed.
- The institutionalization process on joint activities was developed weakly, and therefore, internal conflict management and settlement mechanisms of NGOs did not work.
- NGOs have become polarized, individualized, or marginalized, and their activities were either politicized or overlapped with government policy.

Apparently, NGOs in Azerbaijan are exposed to numerous restrictions and pressures. In this case, the main mission in front of them is to survive and to continue their activities regardless of difficult conditions.

As for NGOs and media involvement in anti-corruption, despite the fact that the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Public Participation came into force on January 1, 2014, there are no Public Councils operating in the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Finance, or the State Oil Fund.

In addition, I would like to note that the loyalty of pro-government NGOs represented in some Public Councils already weakens the opportunities to take public opinions and positions into account in the decisions of government bodies. Public Councils under the Ministry of Education and some state universities are working relatively effectively in this direction. However, some central and local government officials do not comply with the law even formally. Therefore, calls for public participation are meaningless statements, and the arrest of corrupt officials is a political show.

Thanks to Civil Society, Belarusians Have Acknowledged the Unprecedented Scale of Repressions in the Country

■ Arseny Sivitsky

The political crisis in Belarus emerged after the presidential elections of August 2020 and was accompanied by a brutal crackdown and repressions against civil society and independent media putting them in very difficult conditions. Nevertheless, even against the background of politically motivated repressions, civil society organizations and media outlets are committed to their main mission of providing

information about the ongoing crisis, its key factors, and causes and effects.

Their activities include investigations of the falsification of presidential elections results, violations of laws, and exceeding the limits of authority by state security agencies and the bureaucratic apparatus, as well as investigations of corruption schemes among the Belarusian political elites with

the aim to make them accountable for their deeds. Volunteer and human rights organizations are providing assistance for those who have been repressed during this dramatic period for Belarusian society. Thanks to them, Belarusians have acknowledged the unprecedented scale of repression in the country. According to their estimations, around 33,000 Belarusians faced repressions, and there are about 180 political prisoners.

Corruption is another criterion that is used to put people or legal entities on the Western sanctions list, which were developed and advocated by Belarusian opposition centers operating in exile, such as Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's office

or the People's Anti-crisis Management headed by Pavel Latushko.

Although such activities pose risks for Belarusian civil society actors, they facilitate growing attention to the crisis in Belarus for both Belarusian society and the international community. While political activists, volunteers, and independent journalists confront the repressive state machine face-to-face, domestic moral support, international solidarity, and assistance are key for sustained development of the civil society and independent media in Belarus.

Civil Society and Independent Media Are Decisive Factors to the Rule of Law Functioning in Moldova

■ Ion Tăbârță

How do you assess the degree of independent media and civil society development in your country?

Both the media and civil society in the Republic of Moldova is of two types — independent and politically obedient, this especially refers to the press.

The media in the Republic of Moldova has gone through several stages of evolution, and throughout this period the biggest problem has been political interference in the functioning of the press. Until 2009, there were brutal forms of censorship and the monopoly imposed by the state and the ruling party. After 2009, with the arrival of pro-European governments at the helm of the Republic of Moldova, the Moldovan media no longer functioned on the model of censorship of the ruling party, as it was during the ruling Communist Party of Moldova and the party's leader, Vladimir Voronin.

The pro-European Moldovan political leaders in charge of the Republic of Moldova, being in permanent dispute with each other, but also with the communist opposition in the parliament, began more and more to form a "party of mass media," which would be favorable to them in reporting their actions, but also to attack competitors and political opponents through the media. The oligarchization of the Republic of Moldova, also called "the phenomenon of the captive state," was manifested by the oligopolization and berlusconization of the Moldovan media. The rather small media market in the Republic of Moldova, controlled by the country's former informal leader, Vladimir Plahotniuc, and the political "partisanship" of the media has produced a cartelization of Moldovan information sources.

The state institution responsible for the media, the Audiovisual Coordinating Council, with some small exceptions, did not show itself as a fair and independent arbitrator in judging information sources, often showing political obedience to the ruling party. The same can be said about the Competition

Council, which must regulate the media advertising market in the Republic of Moldova. Under these conditions, the independent media found it very difficult to survive, there were times when the situation was dramatic. The free press in the Republic of Moldova, for years, has fought hard for survival, in harsh legislative and economic conditions.

Broadly speaking, only with the help of the EU and foreign donors, the independent media in the Republic of Moldova has managed to overcome the dominant phenomena in the Moldovan press: artificially limited sources of advertising funding, cartel agreements, and politically imposed monopolies. While the external sources of funding are helping the Moldovan media survive, they are also limited and can only partially and temporarily cover the needs of the newsrooms.

Civil society is a phenomenon that appeared in the Republic of Moldova after the collapse of the USSR, because in the Soviet period there was a unique party ideology, and everything that was an alternative to this ideology from the beginning was annihilated. Therefore, the civic initiative in the Republic of Moldova is slightly more developed compared to consolidated democracies. Broadly speaking, Moldovan civil society, capable of opposing politics and contributing to legislative reforms, has been developed by the network of NGOs funded by external donors. This bothers politicians in power, who have often directly attacked NGOs funded by foreign donors, accusing them of being sponsored by oligarchs or foreign agents, following the Russian model. In some cases, the government even tried to form a comfortable, parallel "civil society" in order to annihilate criticism from active NGOs, which vehemently opposed the ruling party's democratic backsliding.

Do civil society and media independence influence the fight against corruption in your country?

Undoubtedly, the independent media and an active civil society

have an important role to play in preventing corruption in the Republic of Moldova. The independent press and civil society are constantly monitoring the way in which state institutions take anti-corruption actions, ensure the transparency of the activity of public authorities liable to corruption and, if corruption has been detected, put pressure on the government to comply with the law. Both the independent media and active civil society are two of the basic tools involved in the process of combating corruption.

At the same time, the independent media and active civil society have the means to raise public awareness of the risks of corruption and can mobilize public opinion to oppose corruption by political, economic, or judicial actors. In the period until 2009, when the authoritarian tendencies of the then head of state, Voronin, were manifested, and in 2016-2019, when the Republic of Moldova was informally led by the leader of the Democratic Party of Moldova, Plahotniuc, the independent press and civil society were the most active groups who opposed to the increasingly obvious slide of the Republic of Moldova on the path of authoritarianism.

Even if they do not have the legal tools to fight corruption, the independent media and active civil society, by raising public awareness, have been able to stop acts of corruption committed by political actors. Often, the independent press and active civil society were the only actors in society who opposed the government's acts of corruption. This happens under the conditions in which the state institutions were

passively witnessing the injustices committed by those in power, and even when the pro-European parties from the Republic of Moldova discredited themselves through acts of corruption. It was thanks to activity by civil society and independent media that the entire society found out that the financial system was looted (the so-called billion theft). After learning about the "theft of the billion" in Moldovan politics, a broad process began, which will be a long one, to reset the Moldovan political class, after which a "healthy" alternative to the leadership of the Republic of Moldova could emerge, able to contribute to democratization of Moldovan society and the construction of a state with functional institutions.

Any state that has reached democracy has a strong civil society as well as an independent mass media, which are necessary elements that ensure the realization of reforms and the development of society. In the Republic of Moldova, active civil society and the independent press bring many benefits to society. They are important partners for authorities at all levels, which should be open and inclusive to the active part of the society, and act in the interests of the people so that they are informed and their rights respected.

An independent media and an active civil society, together with the EU, that conditionally supports the government, can be the decisive factors capable of putting pressure on political power to carry out effective reforms to eradicate corruption, thus contributing to the functioning of the rule of law and to the development of Moldovan society.

Ukraine Starts Its Path in Forming the Culture of Participation

■ Artem Bidenko

Ukraine is at the beginning of the stage of forming an active political culture, a culture of participation. This applies to all spheres of life, including the media. European and Atlantic countries have passed this stage in the middle of the last century, so the personal responsibility of citizens is the general norm.

In Ukraine, only some opinion leaders understand the importance of independent media, NGOs, the fight against

corruption in all its forms (including political corruption) and try to shape the appropriate agenda. At peak times (for example, the Revolution of Dignity), such influence is a priority and strongly molds the development of Ukraine. Still, considerable time is needed for the majority of people to realize the importance of these elements and contribute to their development.

The background features a collage of Euro banknotes in various colors (yellow, green, pink, blue) and a digital display showing 'EUR 201'. The display is a light blue strip with black numbers. The text 'MR MC' and the number '8' are also visible on other parts of the display.

EU's COVID-19 Macro-Financial Assistance Package for Its Eastern Neighborhood

In April, 2020 the European Commission has adopted a proposal for a **COVID-19 macro-financial assistance package** for its Eastern neighborhood partners to help the countries limit the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic.

As part of its global response to the coronavirus outbreak, the European Commission is mobilizing an emergency support package for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine of up to EUR 80 million for immediate needs and up to EUR 883 million for the short and medium term to support the social and economic recovery of the region.

Direct EU Support to Local Small Businesses Could Reduce Pandemic Related Economic Loss in Armenia

■ **Gevorg Gasparyan, Narine Petrosyan, and Hakob Hakobyan**

According to the announcement of the European Commission, the EU will provide EUR 80 million of immediate and EUR 883 million of medium-term support to the six Eastern Partnership countries in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. As we can see such an assistance package aims to respond both to the immediate needs of the health systems of EaP countries by supporting the supply of medical devices and personal equipment, as well as medium-term needs to small and medium-sized enterprises and the vulnerable groups of society. Currently, Armenia is bracing itself for a dramatic increase in the number of infections, and the EU's assistance can benefit the development of the next phase of the response in Armenia.

While the economic impact of the pandemic in the EaP region as well as in Armenia is still difficult to forecast, the effective government measures against the virus and gradual assistance also from the side of the EU will be essential to shorten the time to recovery and keep the entire region stable.

Do you consider this kind of support sufficient?

Alongside with adequate state programs, the amount allocated for support could have a moderately positive effect. It is of course not sufficient to offset the vast present and future economic consequences of the pandemic. Another factor in play is the final distribution of financial aid through the Armenian state apparatus to the private sector. However, it is proportional to EU support to other EaP countries as seen below.

What kind of EU programs would best help your country prevent the dramatic spread of COVID-19 and reduce the impacts of the outbreak — health, educational, technical, business support programs, etc.?

Direct support to local small businesses would have a higher influence on reducing pandemic-related economic loss. Those programs would have a multiplicative effect on the population needs and other mentioned areas of impact. The EU has experience of working with the Armenian private sector and NGOs in the past. The initiation of such cooperation during the pandemic would bring interesting results and would further expand the network of overlapping ties between the EU, the Armenian government, and the Armenian private sector.

As for the prevention of the spread of the pandemic, it is more likely that factors like Armenia's government actions in recent months are more at play. In the past, the EU has constantly sought the improvement of the institutional efficacy of Armenian government institutions. The work in this direction must continue in the future with new intensity as some institutional reforms initiated by the EU in the past have proved useful during a pandemic, such as the e-governance infrastructure of the Armenian government, which almost entirely is a result of EU guidance and financial support.

Another crucial action would be the exchange of the vaccine in case European companies develop it in the future or support in acquiring it from other parties.

How did the pandemic influence the relations between your country and the EU?

Before the implementation of the Eastern Partnership Support Package, the scale of EU support in the region was relatively small and less noticeable. Instead, China and Russia were struggling to gain the lead in overcoming the pandemic. Proof of this was the humanitarian assistance provided by China to Armenia in early April in the form of medical equipment and other necessary facilities.

Although it took some time for Brussels to develop its main support package due to the crisis in the EU, the EU seems to be becoming a leading donor in the Eastern Partnership, particularly in Armenia, helping to fight the epidemic, especially its economic woes. With this program, Armenia has received about EUR 92 million in support from the EU (the third largest after Ukraine and Georgia). The statement on the package will also be a stimulus for the Eastern Partnership summit to be held in June 2020, which will help strengthen the EU's position as a key international player in the region and ensure public support.

It is, however, hard to find any specifically Armenia-related factors for the aid package size that are the product of the recent years or the pandemic itself. EU financial aid to the Eastern Partnership countries and specifically to South Caucasian countries has generally followed the same pattern over the years. If we take South Caucasus, it turns out that Georgia has been the largest recipient of EU aid in the region since 2007, followed by Armenia. Azerbaijan is in the last place¹. In the EaP region, Ukraine has been the number one recipient for all fiscal years since 2007. The Support Package largely follows the same pattern with Ukraine receiving EUR 190 million (the highest), Georgia EUR 183 million (second highest), then Armenia EUR 93 million (third), Moldova EUR 87 million, Belarus EUR 60 million, and Azerbaijan only EUR 14 million. Azerbaijan and Belarus have traditionally received the lowest amount of EU aid, while Ukraine and Georgia the highest. Armenia and Moldova have been receiving relatively proportional amounts.

Thus, the dynamics of Armenia-EU interactions during the pandemic generally proceed within the same frameworks developed between Armenia and EU over the years and don't mark any significant changes in their relations. However, as mentioned above, the aid package might have a positive impact on the EU's perceived role as a progressive power center and a key player in the region in light of rising instability in the world.

¹ https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/content/explore/recipients_en

EU Programs Allocated to Civil Society Institutions and Business Associations Could Help Azerbaijan Overcome the Coronavirus Pandemic

■ Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu

Do you consider this kind of support sufficient?

Even though the EU has allocated financial assistance (EUR 14 million) to Azerbaijan that is less than in other countries, still, I think it is sufficient because Azerbaijan has assisted 13 states in fighting the coronavirus pandemic and donated USD 10 million to the World Health Organization.

What kind of EU programs would best help your country prevent the dramatic spread of COVID-19 and reduce the impacts of the outbreak — health, educational, technical, business support programs, etc.?

Ideally, EU programs would be allocated not only to the government but also to civil society institutions and business associations to meet their information and communication needs during the pandemic period. I think that the EU's support for the state is more critical in the technical, educational, and medical spheres. Technical support can be focused on developing policy recommendations and modernizing the economy for specific projects, especially in the post-pandemic period. The involvement of the IFIs, such as EIB and EBRD in the technical support program, can also increase the effectiveness of the programs.

How did the pandemic influence the relations between your country and the EU?

The coronavirus pandemic has primarily affected tourist relations and student exchanges with the EU. Thus, in January-April 2020, the number of arrivals from EU member states decreased by an average of 2.2 times compared to the same period last year. The number of Polish tourists decreased by 2.5 times, Dutch tourists — by 2.3 times. At the same time, the number of tourists and students visiting EU countries from Azerbaijan has sharply decreased.

Besides, since the primary buyers of Azerbaijani crude oil from European countries are Italy, France, and Germany, the country faced difficulties with the sale of oil, especially in connection with the situation in Italy. The price of Azeri Light crude oil, which has always been more expensive than the British Brent crude oil, was at least USD 5 cheaper than Brent during the crisis period in Italy. As a result, Azerbaijan lost USD 100 million from crude oil sales.

EU Assistance during the Pandemic should Target Economic Policy Change in Georgia

■ Kakha Gogolashvili

Even if the EU assistance was not sufficient and effective, the ethical citizen of Georgia or the government should never complain about it, and here is why: First, the EU itself is in a deep crisis and suffered from the COVID-19 outbreak more than any other region of the world. Second, the EU stood and supported Georgia all along since its independence and there is no reason for not being grateful for all that was done up to today. Third, it was already a real sacrifice on behalf of the EU to commit EUR 15 billion for external aid globally, including for EaP partner states for whom the EU will spend more than EUR 2 billion in grants and long-term favorable credits.

In fact, this is just an assumption, saying “even” and “if.” When COVID-19 affected Georgia, the EU has been supportive and effective offering the country immediate assistance of EUR 20 million practically immediately, for urgent medical equipment needs. Another EUR 80 million is already available supporting small and medium businesses around the country.

EUR 150 million of macro-financial assistance is also committed and will be disbursed in two tranches on the course of 2020-2021 to support the country's balance of payments and the budgetary deficit. Also, the EU is contributing significantly to the IMF lending package that presumably may amount to USD 1.5 billion and which Georgia expects to receive in 2020-2021. Any other assistance expected from the international organizations contains EU funding too. At the same time, EU-owned financial institutions — EBRD and EIB — continue financing already committed projects in Georgia. The infrastructural projects financed/claimed to be financed by the EIB in 2019-2030 amount to EUR 3.5 billion. Continuation of these projects is crucial for Georgia's future including perspectives of getting out from the economic slowdown caused by COVID-19.

The assistance is never enough and exhaustive. No country in the world will have an easy path from the crisis itself

or through assistance provided by the partners and the international community. Indeed, the feeling that there is such a friend as the EU makes the government and the society in Georgia confident, full of beliefs and expectations for survival and improvement.

A big part of the EU assistance will go to support business, but the important question is “how to support?” and “in what areas?” Georgia’s problem with or without COVID-19 is a weak industry, inefficient and uncompetitive agriculture, low professional and immobile workforce resulting in structural unemployment, low productivity, low level of competitiveness of products (domestically or externally), and chronic

devaluation of the currency. The tourism sector, upon which all expectations lay, cannot become a driver for full economic recovery and development. Georgia needs new technologies, know-how, more investments, assistance in the training and education of professionals, and development of industries in regions. One important lesson learned from the pandemic is that any country — big or small — should be self-sufficient at certain/minimal levels. It cannot fully depend on the import of goods, foodstuffs, or equipment. Georgia probably is one of the countries that needs to overcome this dependence and become a “Faber society” and international and EU assistance, first of all, should serve this aim.

Moldova Requires New EU Programs of Direct Support for Sectors Affected by COVID-19

■ Igor Girlea

Even though the fact that this financial support will mitigate the negative impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, we should understand that it will not cover all the losses incurred.

Thus, for this support to be as efficient as possible, it is highly important to carefully, and in a prompt manner, inject this financial support in solving the main problems provoked by the spread of coronavirus. In other words, I consider that this support, if to be spent in a proper and timely manner, is enough to help the governments to set the cornerstones for economic and social recovery.

Unfortunately, the governments in the Eastern European states proved to be inefficient in identifying and tackling the problems provoked by the COVID-19 outbreak. Moreover, Eastern European countries are famous for their rampant corruption scandals. In this context, the EU should invent some new programs of support that would allow providing

direct financial support to the most flawed parts of the health, educational, technical, business, and other such sectors, after a thorough assessment. The support itself should be offered to the beneficiaries (legal entities, natural persons) without intermediaries to avoid any type of embezzlement.

The pandemic didn’t significantly influence the relations between Moldova and the EU, in other words, it didn’t change the paradigm. It’s worth mentioning that since the fall of 2019, because of the lack of will of Moldova’s government to promote some structural, democratic reforms, the EU reviewed its approach to bilateral relations with Moldova, becoming more reserved in assisting Moldova’s government. Unfortunately, the actions taken by the Moldovan government during the pandemic, just highlighted for the EU that it is leaning to less democratic methods of governing, thus contributing to a continual worsening of EU-Moldova bilateral relations.

EU Proves To Be Reliable Partner for Ukraine amid Coronavirus Pandemic

■ Ivan Nagornyak

How did the pandemic influence the relations between your country and the EU?

From the very beginning of the outbreak, the EU has declared that its partners will be not left alone with this crisis.

In March, the EU allocated the first package of support for Ukraine (EUR 80 million). Overall, under different regional and bilateral programs, EU support to Ukraine's coronavirus response has reached up to EUR 190 million, and EUR 13 million of humanitarian aid to the people who are most affected by the crisis, especially in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Besides that, the EU has approved a EUR 500 million loan to Ukraine as part of its fourth macro-financial assistance program to support its financial situation, so Ukraine will be able to overcome peak payments on its foreign loans.

All this has shown that the EU is a reliable partner for Ukraine, ready to help it carry its burden and fight the fight with a crisis.

Of course, COVID-19 has influenced the type and frequency of the bilateral dialogue between the EU and Ukraine. For example, the visit of the EU High Representative Josep Borrell was postponed. Ukraine expected this visit because this was to be the High Representative's first visit to the Eastern Partnership countries and to the contact line in Donbas, which could be a great diplomatic signal that the EU stands with Ukraine in its conflict with Russia.

But there is also a place for a good story about bilateral dialogue. The EU has invited Ukraine to join the Health Security Committee as an observer, where the EU and its Member States consult each other on coordinating responses on serious cross-border threats to health. Ukrainian doctors and scientists are actively working with their counterparts in the EU on the COVID-19 response.

Do you consider this kind of support sufficient?

The COVID-19 outbreak has become a significant challenge for Ukraine's economy and state institutions, especially in the

healthcare system. The results of the quarantine measures showed that Ukraine is dealing quite well when we look at the numbers of infected people.

On the other hand, because of the outbreak, different experts estimate that the decline in GDP will reach 5-15%. And there is a concern that, without support from its main partners like the EU, Ukraine will have to go through a tough time this fall. That's why we should not exclude that Ukraine will need more assistance from the EU.

COVID-19 has brought the biggest damage for Ukrainian SMEs, and that is why the EU could help them with widening its EU4Business program that provides SMEs with access to profitable loans.

What kind of EU programs would best help your country prevent the dramatic spread of COVID-19 and reduce the impacts of the outbreak — health, educational, technical, business support programs, and such like?

The EU support package includes a mix of all the above-mentioned kind of programs. This is an optimal instrument to provide comprehensive aid for the people and organizations who are in need.

What is inevitable, is that attention to the healthcare programs and their support from the EU and Ukraine will increase to prevent other outbreaks. The EU is already working closely with the WHO to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Ukraine. Perhaps the EU and other international partners will need to improve the coordination of their aid in the case of a pandemic so that aid reaches all regions of the country.

As a situation in the Donbas remains quite unstable, the EU and Ukraine's authorities will need active cooperation to prevent an outbreak of a pandemic in the region when checkpoints will be reopened on the border.

Expert Biographies

Heghine Aleksanyan

Heghine Aleksanyan is an analyst and editor-in-chief of the Translation department at “Enlight” Public Research Center NGO. Previously, she was the coordinator of the “Analytical Forum” department at the same organization. Heghine has a bachelor’s degree in public administration from Yerevan State University and has recently graduated from the American University of Armenia. She has also studied for six months at Masaryk University, in the Czech Republic on an Erasmus+ exchange program. Heghine is an editor and author of dozens of articles, mainly in the field of art and culture.

Artem Bidenko

Artem Bidenko is the head of the Institute of Information Security in Ukraine. He holds a master’s degree in political science from Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Mr. Bidenko is an author of numerous articles, co-author of two books, and has worked as deputy minister, state secretary. As a national expert, he has led different national communicational projects. Artem was responsible for managing the national brand UkraineNow project and has organized more than 20 national and worldwide media campaigns.

Kateryna Bornukova

Dr. Kateryna Bornukova is the academic director of BEROE Economic Research Center. Kateryna holds a master’s degree in economics from the Kyiv School of Economics and a doctorate degree in economics from the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. Dr. Bornukova’s research interests include macroeconomics, the economics of transition, and labor economics. She is professor for the Master of Business Administration program at the IPM Business School in Minsk and previously served as a senior economic advisor to the UN Resident Representative in Belarus. Dr. Bornukova also works as a consultant for the World Bank and other international organizations.

Gevorg Gasparyan

Gevorg Gasparyan is a research analyst at “Enlight” Public Research Center NGO. He holds a bachelor’s degree in political science from Yerevan State University and a master’s and doctorate degree in international relations from Jilin University in China. Gevorg’s research interests include international security, economic studies, and domestic institution building.

Igor Girlea

Igor Girlea is an independent researcher. He holds a bachelor’s degree in law and a master’s degree in law from the State University of Moldova. From 2012-2018, Igor was an active member of civil society, working with NGOs to defend, promote, and represent youths’ interests. From 2018-2020 Igor was a consultant at the Legal Committee of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova. Igor’s research interests include the development of the East European Partnership with a focus on legal reforms in Moldova in connection with EEP conditions, and specifically with strengthening legal frameworks and economical restructuring.

Kakha Gogolashvili

Kakha Gogolashvili is a senior fellow and Director of European Studies Center at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. In 1990, he started working in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia in charge of international economic relations. From 1994-1996, Mr. Gogolashvili engaged in official negotiations on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between Georgia and European Communities. From 1996-2000, he worked at the Mission of Georgia to the EU as a counselor and later as a deputy chief of mission / chargé d’affaires.

As a Director of the Department of Relations with the EU at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Mr. Gogolashvili initiated a governmental commission on PCA Implementation (2000). He holds a diplomatic rank of the Envoy Extraordinary Plenipotentiary.

For the last 18 years, Mr. Gogolashvili has been engaged in different projects contributing to Europeanization of the country, in particular assisting the Georgian government in the design and implementation of the institutional and legal reforms carried out according to PCA, European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and other relevant frameworks for EU-Georgia relations.

Hakob Hakobyan

Hakob Hakobyan was an analyst at “Enlight” Public Research Center NGO, in the Economics department. He has written, translated, and edited many articles in the field of economics and was coordinating the division of economists at “Enlight” and designed the department’s own projects. Hakob was a brilliant student pursuing his master’s degree in Economics at the American University of Armenia until he heroically fell on the battlefield for Artsakh and his homeland. Hakob received his bachelor’s and first master’s degree from the Armenian State University of Economics. He also earned a second master’s degree from Tartu University in Estonia in social science. Hakob was an analyst at the Central Bank of Armenia and had ambitious plans of becoming a data scientist.

Dzmitry Halubnichy

Dzmitry Halubnichy is an advisor at the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Research (BISR). He holds a doctorate degree in political science, and his research is focused mainly on the foreign policy of Belarus, Eurasian integration processes, geostrategy, and geopolitics.

Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu

Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu is an economist and civil society activist from Azerbaijan. He has a doctorate degree in economics from Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC). He began his career at the Economic Research Center, a Baku-based think tank, promoting economic development and good governance. He was a member of the Steering Committee of the EU Eastern Partnership Program’s Civil Society Forum (2011-2012) and served as a representative to the international board Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) from 2013–2019. He was a researcher at the Higher Economic School, Warsaw in 1999-2000, a research

fellow at Central European University, Budapest in 2004-2005, a teaching fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2008-2009, a visiting professor at Duke University in 2015-2016, and a research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 2017-2018. Since September 2018, Dr. Ibadoghlu has been based at Rutgers University and teaches courses in the Department of Political Science and the Department of Economics. Additionally, Dr. Ibadoghlu is a postdoc fellow in the Rutgers Center for European Studies. His research interest include the economic, social, and political implications of oil revenues management with a focus on the political effects of natural resources in the Caspian Sea Basin regions.

Shahla Ismayil

Shahla Ismayil is a gender expert and women's rights defender. She chairs the Women's Association for Rational Development (WARD), aiming for women's empowerment and participation. Shahla Ismayil authored over 120 projects and over 150 publications, including manuals, policy papers, and recommendation packs in the field of human rights, gender equality, and civil society. She is an attorney for Human Rights House Foundation in Azerbaijan, as well as an advisor for two grant-making women's foundations – the Global Fund for Women and Urgent Action Fund for Women's Rights. Shahla Ismayil also monitors and reports on civil society sustainability in Azerbaijan with a specific focus on women's rights organizations. In September 2018, she was awarded the Bob Hepple Equality Award by Equal Rights Trust (UK) for 20 years of work in justice and equality. In 2020, Shahla Ismayil was elected to coordinate the Azerbaijan National Platform of the EaP Civil Society Forum for 2 years.

David Kiziria

David Kiziria is a consultant in different sectors: eGov/GovTech, anti-corruption reforms, and innovative systems. Specialized in Digital Transformation, developing Innovative Business Models and smart-services and DLT/Blockchain systems.

From 2020, Mr. Kiziria was a blockchain expert at the regional intergovernmental organization GUAM (Organization for Democracy and Economic Development) and a consultant at the Ministry of Finance in Georgia.

From 2014-2017, he was the advisor of the presidential administration of Ukraine. He was actively involved in and coordinated various projects in the sphere of reforms (eGov / GovTech and eServices, eProcurement, Blockchain eAuction, administrative services, GPU, NABU, in different ministries (Justice, Social Policy, AgroPolitics) in Kyiv and Odessa State Administrations) in Ukraine.

Since 2015, Mr. Kiziria has been actively promoting and coordinating DLT/Blockchain-based projects for eGovernment Services (eAuction, Revenue Service Georgia), as well as for the university sector.

Mr. Kiziria is an Associate Professor at the University of Georgia and an invited lecturer in different universities (FreeUni, GIPA), co-founder and board member of the Georgia IT Cluster, and Georgia Blockchain association.

Teona Kupunia

Teona Kupunia has over 10 years of experience in democracy and governance, specializing in democracy work, governance,

political party work, gender equality issues, civil society work, and operations management. Teona serves as NDI Georgia's deputy director. Prior to that, she managed NDI's public opinion research program, gender program, and parliamentary program. She has also worked on elections. Teona has contributed to NDI's efforts in the region — advising NDI/Armenia's research program (2018) and NDI/Kyrgyzstan's gender equality program (2019). Teona is a political scientist by training holding two master's degrees in international relations from Tbilisi State University and a master's degree in international and European affairs from Linköping University in Sweden.

Ivan Nagornyak

Ivan Nagornyak is an adviser to the vice prime minister for European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine. He holds a doctorate degree in political science from the Institute of International Relations, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Dr. Nagornyak is the author of several articles about the European neighborhood policy, Eastern partnership initiative, and the EU economic policy toward its Eastern neighbors. From 2017-2020, he worked as a fellow for the EU-funded project "Support to the implementation of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement" — Association4U affiliated with the Government Office for European and Euro-Atlantic integration, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. Since 2015, he has been an active member and coordinator for economic policy at the All-Ukrainian NGO SD Platform.

Narine Petrosyan

Narine Petrosyan is an economic research analyst at the "Enlight" Public Research Center NGO. In 2020, she was a guest expert of Amberd Research Center, where she is also currently involved as a member of the research group. Narine is an undergraduate student at Armenian State University of Economics, in the faculty of economic regulation and international economic relations. She has participated in several republican and international scientific conferences. Narine is the author of more than 10 scientific publications and scientific articles. Narine's research interests include fiscal-monetary policy, public debt, economic growth, dollarization, technological progress, and the digital economy.

Alina Shcherbyna

Alina Shcherbyna is the chief operating officer of the international women's IT-community Wtech, leader of the children's charity IT-project Code Club Ukraine, and the head of the "Generation UA" charitable foundation. She has a master's degree in marketing and over seven years of practical experience in marketing. Alina specializes in strategic marketing, integrated communications, BTL marketing, and community building. Alina also presents professional development lectures and webinars for students. Under her leadership, the Code Club project taught more than 10,000 children in Ukraine for free in 2020, and the Wtech IT community has grown to 3,500 members in Ukraine, the UK, and Germany.

Maryna Shevtsova

Dr. Maryna Shevtsova is the founder of Equal Opportunities Platform (EOP), a Ukrainian regional NGO that works to promote equal opportunities, inclusion, and non-discrimination for all underrepresented groups in Ukrainian society with a focus on decision-making systems in social, political, and economical processes.

Prior to founding EOP, from 2016-2020, Maryna carried out independent research projects at Humboldt University (Humboldt University Fellowship) in Germany, Florida University (Fulbright Fellowship) in the USA, Lund University (Swedish Institute Fellowship) in Sweden, and at the Middle East Technical University (Erasmus+) in Turkey.

From 2017-2019, she worked as a returning expert of GIZ (German Agency for International Cooperation) in Ukraine, coordinating projects on LGBTQ rights advocacy. Maryna has a master's degree in international economic relations from Dnipro National University in Ukraine, a master's degree in gender studies from Central European University, Hungary, a doctorate degree in economics from Dnipro National University in Ukraine, and a doctorate degree in Political Science from Humboldt University, Germany.

Maryna researched, edited, and authored numerous books and articles on the topics of democratization and human rights norm diffusion, LGBTQ and women's rights, right-wing populism, and anti-gender movements in the Eastern European region. Her most recent publications include edited volumes "LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe: Resistance, Representation and Identity" (with Radzhana Buyantueva) published by Palgrave Macmillan and "LGBTI Asylum Seekers and Refugees from a Legal and Political Perspective: Persecution, Asylum and Integration" (with Arzu Guler and Deniz Venturi) published by Springer. Her book "LGBTI politics and value change in Ukraine and Turkey: Exporting Europe?" was published in April 2021 with Routledge Studies in Gender, Sexuality, and Politics.

Arseny Sivitsky

Arseny Sivitsky is a co-founder and director of the Minsk-based Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies (Belarus), and a security and foreign policy analyst, focusing on international and regional security, strategic affairs, Russia, and Eurasia. Arseny graduated with honors and has a master's degree in philosophy from the Belarusian State University. He is conducting doctoral research in the field of social philosophy and methodology of science at the Institute of Philosophy, Belarusian National Academy of Science, where he is also a research fellow at the Center for the Study of Globalization, Integration and Socio-Cultural Cooperation. Arseny is a military officer in reserve of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus.

As an independent foreign policy and strategy adviser, Arseny cooperates with a range of consultancy agencies and specializes in investment, political and security risks assessment, and the post-Soviet space. He has wide experience in holding briefings for political and military officials and participating in political and military simulations (wargames). Arseny lives and works in Minsk, Belarus.

Mariam Sumbadze

Mariam Sumbadze is the director of the Georgian ICT Cluster with substantial experience working with NGOs and business associations in the field of innovation and technologies.

She is skilled in business development, corporate client relations, international relations, IT project management, policy analysis, political science, editing, and public speaking and has been involved in a number of international and local programs and conferences.

Mrs. Sumbadze supports youth engagement in the ICT field

by developing a number of programs for young people in the regions and empowering women to develop careers in tech.

Mrs. Sumbadze is a strong program and project management professional with a bachelor's degree in international relations from Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University.

Ion Tăbârță

Ion Tăbârță is university lecturer and researcher at the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS) "Viitorul." Ion has a degree in history (State University of Moldova) and political sciences (The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest), as well as a master's degree in international relations (University of Bucharest). He was vice-director at the Institute of Political Analysis and Consulting "POLITICON" and a political columnist at the weekly newspaper "Democratia."

David Tsiskaridze

Mr. David Tsiskaridze is a chairman of the International Business and Economic Development Center (IBEDC), from Georgia, with 10 years managing experience.

David holds a master's degree in economics of trade from Tbilisi State University and a doctorate degree in Energy and Electrical engineering from Georgian Technical University.

He is the author of several articles and publications. David has consultancy experience in the framework of international projects, including EU International and Regional programs (EU Commission, ENPI and Black Sea CBC program) with 10 years of diversified experience.

David is an expert in Harmonization of Digital Market (HDM) of the EaP Civil Society Forum. He is a coordinator of the Economic Integration and Convergence with the EU policy working group of the Georgian National Platform of EaP CSF.

Nina Vaisman

Nina Vaisman is a director, producer, and author of the viral video "I am a Belarusian Woman".

Vahan V. Yeghiazaryan

Vahan V. Yeghiazaryan is the president of Zargatsum (Development) social movement. He holds a specialist degree in international relations from the Russian-Armenian University and a Master of Business Administration degree in strategic management and corporate governance from the Higher School of Economics. Mr. Yeghiazaryan is the principal author of "How to open a business in Eurasian Economic Union" handbook and author of several articles focused on international relations. Mr. Yeghiazaryan has been working as a top manager in the corporate sphere and is an expert on the scientific expert group in the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia.

Policy Recommendations

- The governments of the EaP countries respond with varying degrees of enthusiasm to integration initiatives such as the creation of a single economic space or integration into a single digital market. In this situation, it makes sense to form a group of “advanced EaP countries,” formed out of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, while remaining within the EaP framework. These countries signed Association Agreements with the EU, and in May 2021, signed a trilateral memorandum on the start of enhanced cooperation on European integration — “Associated Trio.” When developing new initiatives within the framework of the EaP, these countries should be offered a deeper level of integration and a greater degree of participation in certain EU projects than other EaP countries.
- At the same time, in order to achieve a balanced involvement among the different EaP countries in joint actions, it is necessary to develop projects with a regional perspective, aimed at civil society institutions of the EaP countries. Simultaneous implementation of such projects in all six countries will contribute to the development of relations and mutual adoption of the best practices between civil societies of the EaP countries.
- Having prioritized the digital transformation of the EaP countries and their integration into the single digital market, entrust IT specialists and IT companies from the EaP countries with the technological implementation of digitalization projects, which will result in the creation of new jobs in the knowledge economy for local youth.
- During the implementation of any joint projects, curators from the EU should strengthen the requirements for EaP member countries to observe inclusiveness in the implementation of these projects. Although there may be legal frameworks in EaP countries to protect the rights of socially disadvantaged groups (particularly women), rural communities, and communities impacted by armed conflict, in practice, many of these laws often do not work because of weak state institutions and/or the cultural characteristics of the regions.
- EU representatives should insist on strict compliance with the rules when implementing joint projects, so that such projects become a model for residents of the EaP countries.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a joint initiative of the European External Action Service of the European Union (EU) together with the EU, its Member States, and six Eastern European partners governing the EU's relationship with the post-Soviet states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The EaP is intended to provide a forum for discussions regarding trade, economic strategy, travel agreements, and other issues between the EU and its Eastern European neighbors. It also aims at building a common area of shared values of democracy, prosperity, stability, and increased cooperation.

