

Civil Society Resilience

The Road to European Integration: Central and Eastern Europe and the Eastern Partnership Countries

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Foreword

Why Civil Society Resilience Matters for Europe, Democracy, and Enlargement

Europe's future will not be determined solely by the decisions taken by governments, parliaments or European institutions. It will also depend on the resilience of the societies that sustain democratic governance from the ground up. Across the continent, civil society organisations have become indispensable actors in defending democratic values, promoting accountability, strengthening public participation and building trust between citizens and institutions. In an era marked by geopolitical confrontation, foreign information manipulation and interference, democratic backsliding, polarisation and growing public distrust, resilient civil society is no longer simply a desirable feature of democratic systems. It has become one of their essential safeguards.

This is particularly evident in the countries of the Eastern Partnership, where democratic reforms unfold alongside profound security challenges. Ukraine continues to defend not only its sovereignty but also its democratic institutions during a full-scale war. Moldova advances on its European path while confronting sustained hybrid pressure. Georgia's civil society

faces an increasingly restrictive political environment, while Armenia is redefining its democratic and European trajectory amid regional uncertainty. Despite these different national contexts, one lesson remains constant: democratic resilience depends on citizens who organise, cooperate and engage, as much as it depends on governments that legislate and implement reforms.

The European Union's enlargement policy has always been more than a technical process of adopting legislation or fulfilling institutional benchmarks. Successful integration requires reforms to become embedded within society, understood by citizens and supported across political cycles. Civil society organisations play a unique role in this process. They monitor reforms, contribute policy expertise, foster informed public debate, counter disinformation, protect fundamental rights and ensure that democratic transformation reaches local communities rather than remaining confined to negotiation tables.

The experiences of Central and Eastern European countries that joined the European Union during previous enlargements confirm that strong civic engagement significantly contributed to successful democratic consolidation. Equally, the experiences emerging today from the Eastern Partnership demonstrate that societies confronting war, hybrid threats and democratic pressure have developed remarkable forms of civic innovation, solidarity and institutional resilience. These experiences deserve not only recognition but also systematic exchange across Europe. Enlargement should be understood as a process of mutual learning, where both existing member states and candidate countries contribute valuable lessons for strengthening democracy.

This publication brings together voices from nine countries united by a common conviction: that resilient civil society is one of the foundations of Europe's future. Through comparative analysis, practical recommendations and reflections drawn from shared experience, the authors examine how civil society contributes to European integration, how organisations can strengthen their long-term resilience, and how cooperation across borders can amplify democratic impact.

Ultimately, investing in resilient civil society is an investment in Europe itself. It strengthens democracy, reinforces the rule of law, increases public trust and helps ensure that enlargement remains not only an institutional achievement but also a genuinely societal one. As Europe prepares for a new chapter of integration, resilient civic communities will remain among its greatest strategic assets.

Raimar Wagner
Project Director
Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom
Romania and Republic of Moldova

Introduction

In May, June and September 2025, three workshops dedicated to strengthening civil society in Eastern Partnership countries to better advocate for European integration of these states took place in Chișinău, Moldova, Bucharest, Romania, and Brussels, Belgium respectively. The workshops were attended by the authors of the present publication and other representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from countries of the Eastern Partnership (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia) and Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria). While all the workshops had the general topic of advancing and promoting the European integration of the EaP countries as the general topic, each addressed a specific element as part of a modus operandi to that end. Thus, the Chișinău workshop focused on **mobilising NGOs for EU integration**, the workshop in Bucharest on **coalition building**, and the session in Brussels **on building NGO resilience.**

The workshops were designed to provide a structured space for discussion and exchange among the participants, supporting the development of the individual written contributions that form the basis of this study. By bringing together perspectives and experiences from different national contexts, the workshops enabled participants to compare challenges, approaches, and lessons related to the role and resilience of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe and the Eastern Partnership countries, as agents of Europeanisation. These discussions were intended not

to produce a single, predetermined perspective, but to stimulate reflection and provide a common framework within which the nine authors could develop their own findings to contribute to this study. For this reason, the following three chapters of the study are structured around the topics of the workshops.

The discussions held during the workshops highlighted the essential role of civil society in advancing the European integration of the Eastern Partnership countries, supporting democratic governance and strengthening public resilience. Across all sessions, participants emphasised that civil society organisations contribute not only by promoting democratic values, the rule of law and human rights, but also by increasing public participation, monitoring reforms, providing expertise, and strengthening institutional accountability. While governments remain responsible for implementing public policies, participants agreed that independent civil society serves as an indispensable democratic safeguard, particularly in contexts where political institutions face internal or external pressures.

The workshops highlighted four interconnected priorities for strengthening civil society across the region.

First, effective strategic communication was considered essential for countering increasingly sophisticated disinformation and building public support for European integration. This requires identifying target audiences, developing tailored messages and counter-narratives, using political storytelling, and continuously adapting communication strategies.

Second, participants emphasised coalition-building as a means of sharing expertise, coordinating advocacy and increasing influence on public policy. Partnerships with academia, media and local authorities, as well as mentoring and resource-sharing mechanisms, can further strengthen institutional capacity.

Third, civil society organisations face mounting challenges, including insufficient and bureaucratic funding, declining public trust, weak local presence, GONGOs, and attempts to portray independent organisations as partisan or foreign agents. Georgia illustrates the effects of shrinking civic space and political pressure, while Ukraine demonstrates how crisis can also stimulate civic engagement and solidarity.

Finally, participants stressed the need for diversified, flexible and long-term funding, combined with investment in staff, institutional knowledge, digital security and crisis preparedness. Ultimately, civil society resilience depends on sustainable resources, strong cooperation, professional capacity and public trust.

The substantial discussions at the three workshops and the following contributions made by the authors resulted in this publication, centred on the civil society as an important contributor to the European integration of the Eastern Partnership countries, as well as strengthening civil society resilience through better management and coalition building in all represented Central and Eastern European countries.

The nine authors, representing five European Union member countries (Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia) and four Eastern Partnership countries (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia) have each analysed the current situation of the civil society in their own countries, providing insights into both the achievements and the challenges faced by the local non-governmental sector. They have put forward relevant policy recommendations to help NGOs become more resilient and have long-term impact on their societies. The publication is original in its approach because it centres around lessons civil society organisations from the Eastern Partnership countries could learn from their counterparts in the Central-Eastern European countries - „new members" which joined the EU in 2004-2007 and

have had similar historic experiences after World War II and the fall of communism in 1989. It is helpful to civil society practitioners and stakeholders across Eastern Europe as a guide contributing to a better understanding of the main challenges and the modus operandi of the NGOs in different countries of the region, especially when it comes to their action to bring their societies closer to the European values and accelerate their European integration. Thus, the publication will contribute to strengthening the knowledge of active citizens from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Eastern Partnership about each other, bringing better understanding and fostering stronger and deeper cooperation.

Section 1:

Civil Society as a Driver of EU Integration

Over the past three decades, civil society has evolved from being a peripheral stakeholder in European integration into one of its principal drivers. While accession negotiations remain an intergovernmental process conducted between candidate countries and the European Union, the experiences of both Central and Eastern European member states and the current EU candidate countries of the Eastern Partnership demonstrate that the success of European integration ultimately depends on the extent to which reforms become embedded within society. In this respect, NGOs have proven indispensable in translating European norms into domestic reforms, mobilising public support, strengthening democratic accountability, and ensuring that integration extends beyond formal legislative alignment.

This evolution reflects broader processes of Europeanisation. European integration should not be understood solely as the transfer of legislation or institutional arrangements from Brussels to national governments, but as a multidimensional process of norm diffusion, policy learning and societal transformation.

Within this framework, civil society functions as a bridge between European institutions and domestic constituencies, facilitating dialogue, monitoring reforms, encouraging public participation, and strengthening the social legitimacy of the accession process. Rather than serving merely as beneficiaries of European assistance, NGOs have become active agents of democratic change, embedding European values within national political cultures and promoting accountability at every stage of reform.

The comparative experiences presented in this chapter illustrate that the contribution of civil society has evolved differently across Europe. Countries such as Poland, Slovakia and Bulgaria demonstrate how vibrant civic sectors helped consolidate democratic transitions and prepare societies for successful accession to the European Union. Their experience provides an important repository of institutional knowledge and practical lessons that remain highly relevant for today's candidate and aspiring countries. At the same time, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Armenia operate in significantly more complex geopolitical environments characterised by hybrid threats, external interference, democratic vulnerabilities and, in Ukraine's case, full-scale war. Yet despite these differences, many of the underlying mechanisms through which civil society contributes to European integration remain remarkably similar.

Consequently, this chapter approaches civil society not simply as an independent actor operating alongside governments, but as an essential component of European integration itself. The comparison between established EU member states and Eastern Partnership countries demonstrates that effective accession requires more than political commitment from governments or technical compliance with the acquis communautaire. It requires resilient civic institutions capable of sustaining reforms, fostering democratic participation, countering disinformation, and maintaining public confidence in the European project even during periods

of political instability or external pressure. The experiences examined throughout this chapter suggest that while institutional contexts vary considerably, many of the practices developed during previous enlargements remain transferable and can inform contemporary accession processes across the Eastern Partnership.

A liberal approach should not romanticise civil society as inherently democratic. Civil society is a space of pluralism, but pluralism also includes actors that may be illiberal, exclusionary, clientelist or aligned with authoritarian interests. The policy challenge is therefore not to support "civil society" indiscriminately, but to protect and empower independent organisations that **uphold fundamental rights, democratic accountability, the rule of law, transparency and open public debate.** This distinction is especially important in contexts where GONGOs, foreign-influenced organisations or anti-democratic movements seek to occupy civic space while weakening genuine democratic participation.

Civil Society as an Agent of Europeanisation in Eastern Partnership countries

The experience of both EU member states and candidate countries confirms the argument that civil society constitutes one of the principal societal engines of Europeanisation. Beyond monitoring governmental performance, civil society organisations increasingly participate in drafting legislation, advising public authorities, facilitating public consultations, and ensuring that reforms remain aligned with European democratic standards. This role reflects a hybrid model of governance in which European integration is driven not exclusively by governments but through continuous interaction between state institutions, civic actors and European partners.

Ukraine

European Integration under Wartime Conditions

Among the Eastern Partnership countries, Ukraine provides one of the clearest illustrations of this model. The Revolution of Dignity transformed relations between civil society and public institutions, enabling greater civil society participation in policymaking. Following the fall of the Yanukovych regime, reform-oriented officials increasingly drew on reform proposals developed by civil society during the preceding years of democratic backsliding. The establishment of the **Reanimation Package of Reforms** (RPR) Coalition in 2014 became a prominent example of this cooperation. Bringing together dozens of civil society organisations, the coalition developed reform proposals, supported legislative drafting and advocated reforms in areas central to European integration, including the judiciary and rule of law, anti-corruption, democratic governance, public administration and media freedom. In doing so, civil society moved beyond its traditional watchdog role, supplementing, and at times compensating for, limited state capacity while helping align Ukrainian legislation and institutions with European standards.

Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 fundamentally changed the context in which this model of civil society engagement operated. Many organisations initially redirected substantial capacity towards urgent defence and humanitarian needs. The granting of EU candidate status in June 2022, however, gave renewed impetus to legislative and institutional reform. Civil society increasingly combined its wartime responsibilities with monitoring reform implementation and advocating progress on accession-related commitments. The Ukrainian experience therefore illustrates how European integration can serve not only as a framework for reform but also as a source of resilience, helping to sustain politically difficult institutional changes under conditions of war. In this process, civil society plays a critical role in maintain-

ing reform pressure, supporting accountability and ensuring that wartime constraints do not result in the indefinite postponement of democratic transformation.

Yana Brovdiy

Republic of Moldova

From a Seat at the Table to a Voice that Matters

The Moldovan civil society has gradually established itself as an important contributor to the country's European agenda through sustained policy advocacy, independent monitoring and structured dialogue with public authorities. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum National Platform has become an important mechanism for coordinating expert contributions to the implementation of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, while independent monitoring initiatives, including the Alternative Progress Reports, have provided valuable assessments both for Moldovan institutions and for European partners. The inclusion of civil society representatives in the thirty-seven working groups responsible for preparing Moldova's accession negotiations and completing the analytical screening process represents a significant step towards institutionalising civic participation within the country's European integration architecture.

Nevertheless, Moldova also illustrates the limitations of formal participation mechanisms when they are not accompanied by deeper institutional partnerships. Cooperation between public authorities and civil society often remains procedural rather than genuinely participatory. While consultation mechanisms formally exist, they do not always translate into meaningful influence over policy implementation. Furthermore, the effectiveness of civil society advocacy is constrained by fragmented communication, insufficient coordination among organisations and limited outreach beyond major urban centres. The Moldovan case therefore

demonstrates that successful Europeanisation requires not only institutional access but also sustained public engagement capable of extending the benefits and understanding of European integration to local communities throughout the country.

Dan Nicu

Georgia

When Europeanisation Becomes a Civic Struggle

Georgia offers another important perspective on the relationship between civil society and Europeanisation. The European Commission explicitly identified meaningful civil society participation as one of the conditions attached to Georgia's candidate status, recognising that democratic reforms cannot be implemented solely through governmental action. Yet the Georgian experience also illustrates the vulnerability of civil society when democratic backsliding accelerates. The adoption of legislation modelled on Russia's "foreign agents" law, the establishment of a state-controlled NGO funding mechanism and the suspension of accession efforts generated unprecedented civic mobilisation in defence of Georgia's European future. Throughout this period, Georgian organisations continued monitoring elections, exposing corruption, providing legal assistance to protesters, countering disinformation and explaining the practical implications of European integration for local communities, farmers and small businesses. Their activities demonstrate that civil society often becomes most influential precisely when formal democratic institutions come under political pressure.

George Melashvili

Armenia

From Grassroots Mobilisation to a European Choice

Armenia presents a somewhat different trajectory. Although formal civil society platforms have not always succeeded in coordinating the broader NGO sector, civic organisations have nevertheless played an important role in redefining the country's European aspirations. Particularly noteworthy is the grassroots initiative that gathered sufficient public support to bring Armenia's European aspirations before Parliament, ultimately resulting in the adoption of legislation confirming the country's strategic European orientation. This example illustrates that civil society can influence not only policy implementation but also the strategic direction of national foreign policy. At the same time, support for European integration should be built upon a positive understanding of European values rather than merely reflecting disappointment with alternative geopolitical actors. Sustaining long-term public support therefore requires civic organisations to articulate clearly the democratic, economic and societal benefits of European integration while promoting cooperation with European partners and facilitating continuous peer learning with organisations across the continent.

Vardine Grigoryan

Taken together, these four Eastern Partnership experiences confirm the argument that Europeanisation is ultimately a societal process as much as an institutional one. While each country operates within distinct political and geopolitical circumstances, civil society consistently performs similar functions: translating European norms into domestic reform agendas, strengthening public accountability, generating policy expertise and sustaining democratic legitimacy throughout the accession process. At the same time, these experiences also reveal that the effectiveness of civil

society depends heavily on the openness of domestic political institutions, the availability of meaningful participation mechanisms and the resilience of democratic governance.

Learning from Central and Eastern Europe

While the experiences of the Eastern Partnership countries demonstrate that civil society has become an indispensable actor in advancing European integration under highly complex geopolitical conditions, the accession histories of Central and Eastern European member states illustrate how sustained civic engagement can transform political consensus into durable democratic institutions. Together, these experiences suggest that European integration is not a linear institutional exercise but a cumulative societal process in which governments, civil society, local communities, media and European institutions interact continuously. The historical trajectories of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria therefore provide valuable lessons for today's candidate countries, while contemporary developments in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia demonstrate how these lessons are being adapted to new political realities shaped by hybrid threats, democratic backsliding and external aggression.

Poland

When Europe Became a Societal Project

One of the most striking similarities across all countries examined is that successful European integration has required broad societal ownership rather than exclusive governmental leadership. Thus, Poland's transformation during the 1990s as being driven by a widely shared aspiration to "return to Europe," a vision that

transcended political competition and became a national modernisation project. Civil society organisations played a central role in translating this aspiration into concrete public engagement. Long before accession, Polish NGOs organised civic education campaigns, public consultations and local debates explaining the implications of EU membership, while actively participating in pre-accession instruments such as PHARE, SAPARD and TACIS. These programmes strengthened not only administrative capacity but also the ability of civil society to participate meaningfully in democratic governance. Particularly during the 2003 accession referendum, NGOs became indispensable intermediaries between state institutions and citizens, helping explain the practical consequences of membership and encouraging electoral participation at a moment when public mobilisation was essential for legitimising Poland's European choice.

The Polish experience offers several lessons for the Eastern Partnership countries. First, accession should not be communicated solely as a diplomatic objective or a technical process of legislative approximation. Instead, it must become a societal project capable of engaging citizens across generations, professions and regions. Second, civil society should be involved throughout the accession process rather than being consulted only after major policy decisions have already been made. Finally, European integration should continue to serve as a framework for civic participation even after accession. Nowadays, Polish NGOs remain active promoters of European values through programmes such as Erasmus+, Creative Europe and Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV), while simultaneously acting as a bridge between European institutions and local communities. Their continued engagement demonstrates that accession does not conclude the role of civil society; rather, it transforms its priorities from supporting accession to safeguarding democratic standards within the European Union itself.

Miłosz Hodun

Hungary

The Unfinished work of European Integration

The Hungarian experience demonstrates both the contribution of civil society to EU integration and the importance of ensuring its meaningful involvement throughout the accession process. Hungarian CSOs actively supported and popularised EU membership before accession in 2004, helping to build societal support for the country's European orientation. However, their participation in the accession negotiations themselves remained limited, an experience that points to the need for stronger institutionalised civil society involvement in candidate countries. Hungary's subsequent trajectory also illustrates that EU membership alone cannot guarantee the resilience of democratic institutions or civil society. After 2010, independent NGOs working on rule of law, human rights, migration and other sensitive areas faced growing political and financial pressure, increasing their reliance on EU and other international funding. At the same time, EU membership has provided important safeguards and opportunities: European legal mechanisms have constrained some restrictive measures, while EU programmes, cross-border cooperation and European networks continue to provide resources and partnerships for independent CSOs. The Hungarian experience therefore suggests that civil society should not merely advocate for accession, but should participate actively in the integration process, build domestic and European coalitions, and develop the institutional capacity needed to safeguard democratic reforms after membership.

Csaba Fűzfa

Slovakia

When the Road to Europe Ran Through Civil Society

Slovakia's accession story demonstrates that democratic consolidation and European integration cannot be separated. During the mid-1990s, the country's semi-authoritarian trajectory under Vladimír Mečiar resulted in international isolation and exclusion from the first wave of EU enlargement despite Slovakia's geographical and economic similarities to its neighbours. The decisive turning point did not originate within governmental institutions but within civil society itself. The broad civic coalition **OK98** successfully mobilised citizens against democratic backsliding, contributing significantly to political change and restoring Slovakia's European trajectory. This experience established one of the chapter's central lessons: civil society must remain the ultimate guarantor of democratic governance when political institutions fail to protect constitutional principles.

The Slovak experience remains highly relevant for today's candidate countries. Democratic setbacks, whether caused by authoritarian tendencies, political polarisation or foreign interference, should not be viewed merely as domestic political crises but as direct obstacles to European integration. Therefore, civil society should function as a "vaccination against authoritarianism," maintaining vigilance even after important political milestones such as EU accession have been achieved.

Mario Nicolini

Romania

How Europe became a Catalyst for Civil Society

In the early 1990s, the institutional vacuum following the 1989 Revolution enabled the rapid proliferation of non-governmental

organisations in Romania. Unlike in Poland or Hungary, where pre-1989 dissident networks developed into influential pro-reform movements, Romanian civil society emerged more reactively and initially lacked a coherent role in democratisation. This gradually changed as European integration became a central national objective.

A major milestone came in 1995, when the leaders of all parliamentary parties endorsed the "Snagov consensus," affirming Romania's commitment to democratic principles, market reforms, the rule of law, and EU accession. This rare political consensus accompanied Romania's formal membership application and provided legitimacy for the National Strategy for EU Accession. Civil society consistently supported the authorities' efforts to align the country with European standards. Public backing was also strong: the 2003 constitutional referendum was widely perceived as confirming Romania's "return to Europe," while in 2005, 67% of Romanians expressed a favourable image of the EU, compared with an EU-25 average of 50%.

EU accession conditionality, particularly the Copenhagen Criteria and the European Commission's Regular Reports, strengthened civil society by providing resources and legitimacy to organisations working on human rights, judicial reform, anti-corruption, minority protection, transparency, and public participation. NGOs increasingly acted as intermediaries between European institutions and domestic governance, translating EU standards into national policy debates, monitoring implementation, and pressuring political elites to comply with accession requirements.

After Romania joined the EU in January 2007, civil society continued monitoring post-accession commitments, particularly those related to judicial reform and anti-corruption under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism. Romania's experience therefore illustrates how European integration can contribute to

the emergence of a more Europeanized civil society, capable of using EU conditionality, funding and transnational networks to influence domestic governance and promote democratic norms.

Cristian David

Bulgaria

Communicating Europe from the Ground Up

A series of practical lessons regarding public communication emerge from Bulgaria's accession experience. Government communication alone proved insufficient to sustain public confidence throughout the negotiation process. As accession negotiation advanced at the beginning of the 2000s, anti-European narratives increasingly exploited public uncertainty regarding issues such as agricultural policy, environmental regulations, taxation and the decommissioning of nuclear reactors. Rather than relying exclusively on official information campaigns, Bulgaria gradually developed an innovative partnership model bringing together government institutions, civil society organisations, universities, business associations, journalists and local authorities. This broad coalition fundamentally reshaped communication about European integration by transforming it from an institutional exercise into a participatory civic movement.

Several Bulgarian initiatives illustrate practices that remain highly relevant for the Eastern Partnership today. The **"Europe – Pass It On"** campaign and the associated **EU Information Fair** demonstrated how volunteer networks, face-to-face communication and broad institutional partnerships could substantially increase public trust. Rather than delivering abstract political messages, volunteers, journalists, professors, mayors and professionals answered citizens' practical questions about daily life within the European Union. Communication was decentralised, reaching

both major cities and smaller communities through extensive local outreach. Perhaps most importantly, Bulgarian organisers adopted a principle that remains highly applicable today: successful communication should prioritise listening before persuading. The development of the publication 100 Questions about the EU, based entirely on questions received during public consultations, exemplified how communication strategies could evolve directly from citizens' concerns rather than governmental assumptions.

Zinaida Zlatanova

Similar Challenges Require Stronger European Cooperation

All national cases demonstrate that accession processes are most successful when civil society enjoys genuine institutional partnership with public authorities. The description of Ukraine's Reanimation Package of Reforms illustrates perhaps the most advanced contemporary model of structured cooperation between civic organisations and state institutions. Yet similar principles were evident during previous enlargements. Polish NGOs actively participated in pre-accession programing, Bulgarian organisations became trusted communication partners of government negotiators, while Slovak civic coalitions shaped the country's democratic trajectory at critical political moments. These historical experiences suggest that governments should regard civil society not as an external observer but as a strategic partner capable of contributing expertise, mobilising citizens and strengthening the legitimacy of difficult reforms. The Moldovan experience, where cooperation still often remains largely procedural, demonstrates that formal consultation mechanisms alone are insufficient unless accompanied by genuine influence over policy design and implementation.

Another important lesson concerns the role of European cooperation itself. Across nearly all national cases, European integration is presented not merely as an objective but also as a framework for continuous learning. Ukrainian organisations should actively cooperate with counterparts from Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans to benefit from their experience in implementing reforms and managing accession-related challenges. Similarly, Polish NGOs should deepen partnerships with organisations from Ukraine, Moldova and other aspiring members, recognising that such cooperation produces mutual benefits rather than one-directional assistance. Peer learning is an essential mechanism for strengthening Armenian civil society, while expanding cross-border partnerships under the Eastern Partnership framework would benefit all countries involved. Collectively, these ideas suggest that regional cooperation among civil society organisations represents one of the most valuable yet underutilised instruments of Europeanisation. The transfer of practical experience, institutional knowledge and advocacy techniques allows candidate countries to adapt successful approaches developed during previous enlargements while responding creatively to contemporary geopolitical realities.

Finally, the comparison between the two groups of countries demonstrates that the relationship between civil society and European integration evolves rather than disappears after accession. For current member states, organisations increasingly focus on defending democratic standards, protecting civic space and responding to new forms of democratic backsliding, as illustrated particularly by the Hungarian and Slovak experiences. For candidate countries, by contrast, the immediate priority remains supporting legislative approximation, strengthening public confidence and facilitating reform implementation. Yet the distinction is less pronounced than it initially appears. Across both groups, civil society ultimately performs the same democratic function:

it translates European values into societal practice, promotes accountability, mobilises citizens and safeguards democratic resilience. The experiences of Central and Eastern Europe therefore should not be viewed simply as historical precedents but as living laboratories whose successes and failures continue to provide valuable guidance for the next generation of European integration in the Eastern Partnership.

Section 2:

Building NGO Resilience for Long-term Impact

The resilience of civil society organisations has become one of the defining factors shaping democratic development and European integration across both the Eastern Partnership and the European Union. While resilience has traditionally been understood in terms of organisational sustainability, the experiences presented by the contributors demonstrate that it encompasses a much broader set of capacities: the ability to adapt to political crises, withstand external pressure, maintain public trust, preserve institutional knowledge, and continue advancing democratic reforms under rapidly changing conditions. Whether operating in countries experiencing war, democratic backsliding or financial uncertainty, civil society organisations increasingly find themselves balancing immediate societal needs with their long-term mission of strengthening democratic governance.

Eastern Partnership countries

Civil Society Resilience as Adaptive Democratic Capacity

Resilience should be understood not merely as institutional survival but as the capacity of civic actors to sustain collective action, accountability and democratic legitimacy under adverse political and socio-economic conditions. Across the Eastern Partnership, resilience takes different forms depending on the national context. Ukraine demonstrates resilience through extraordinary civic mobilisation during wartime; Moldova through institutional reforms accompanying the EU accession process; Armenia through continued democratic engagement despite regional security shocks; and Georgia through persistent civic activism in response to democratic backsliding. Even in more restrictive environments such as Belarus and Azerbaijan, resilience survives through informal networks, digital activism and diasporic mobilisation. These diverse trajectories demonstrate that resilient civil society is ultimately defined not by the absence of crises but by its ability to adapt, reorganise and continue pursuing democratic objectives despite them.

Ukraine

Civil Society at War

Ukraine offers one of the strongest contemporary examples of adaptive resilience. Russia's full-scale invasion placed civil society under immense pressure, prompting organisations to rapidly adjust their activities to meet wartime needs. Across the country, civil society organisations and volunteer initiatives scaled up support for the armed forces almost overnight while expanding humanitarian assistance and essential services for civilians affected by the war. Among the most well-known examples are **Come Back Alive** and the **Serhiy Prytula Charity Foundation**,

whose growth reflected a much broader mobilisation involving thousands of formal and informal civic initiatives. This ability to mobilise at scale drew on successive waves of civic activism, particularly during the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity, which strengthened traditions of volunteerism, public participation and democratic accountability. Despite restrictions on some aspects of civic and political life under martial law following the invasion, civil society has remained an important partner of the state in defence support, humanitarian response, service delivery and international advocacy, underscoring its central role in Ukraine's wartime response.

Yet the Ukrainian experience also reveals the limits and costs of resilience. Civil society faces growing operational and organisational pressures, including staff shortages caused by military mobilisation and displacement, burnout among employees and volunteers, greater funding uncertainty as international assistance declines, and the need to balance urgent wartime demands with continued engagement in systemic reforms. The broader lesson for the whole region is that resilience cannot rely indefinitely even on the most extraordinary civic commitment alone. Long-term sustainability requires predictable and flexible core funding, investment in staff retention and well-being, and stronger organisational systems. Ukrainian authorities and European partners should also expand access to reconstruction funding for smaller and regional organisations and involve CSOs more systematically in policy design and service delivery.

Yana Brovdiy

Republic of Moldova

Building Civil Society Resilience through European integration

Republic of Moldova's civil society has been tested by a succession of overlapping crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, energy insecurity, economic disruption, Russian hybrid interference and the suspension of major USAID-supported programmes. These developments have exposed structural vulnerabilities within the NGO sector, particularly its dependence on project-based financing, the emigration of experienced professionals and significant disparities between urban and rural organisations. Moreover, one of Moldova's principal challenges lies precisely in the limited localisation of communication regarding European integration. While substantial progress has been achieved in involving civil society organisations within accession-related working groups and policy discussions, communication efforts continue to focus predominantly on Chișinău and other major urban centres. Rural communities, smaller municipalities and socially diverse groups often receive highly technical information that fails to connect European integration with everyday concerns. Consequently, European integration is frequently perceived through a political lens, associated with particular governing parties rather than presented as a long-term national project supported across society. The Moldovan civil society should therefore prioritise tailored communication strategies adapted to different audiences, strengthen grassroots engagement, and improve coordination among organisations to ensure complementary rather than fragmented public outreach.

Nevertheless, Moldova's EU candidate status has simultaneously created new opportunities to strengthen organisational resilience through deeper cooperation with European institutions, digital transformation and growing partnerships with Ukrainian

civil society. A notable development has been the EU's more proactive support for Moldovan civil society. In 2025, the EU launched a €6 million call for proposals specifically targeting civil society organisations, including support for civic participation and local engagement. This increased investment suggests a shift towards earlier and more sustained engagement, reflecting lessons from democratic challenges elsewhere in the Eastern Partnership. Resilience should therefore become an integral element of Moldova's accession strategy rather than being treated solely as an organisational concern. Practical measures such as crisis response protocols, leadership succession planning, peer-support networks, digital security mechanisms and diversified fundraising strategies should become standard components of institutional development for Moldovan NGOs.

Dan Nicu

Georgia

Civil Society Resilience and the Defence of Democratic Space

Georgia demonstrates another dimension of resilience: the ability of civil society to preserve democratic space under increasingly restrictive political conditions. Georgian organisations continue to monitor elections, document human rights violations, counter disinformation and provide legal assistance despite growing political pressure. Under these circumstances, resilience depends not only on organisational survival but also on strategic adaptation. Georgian organisations should strengthen national and regional coalitions, invest in locally resonant communication, deepen engagement with grassroots communities and diversify their financial base through social enterprises, crowdfunding, membership schemes and stronger cooperation with the Georgian diaspora. Equally important is investment in

organisational governance, digital security and staff development, ensuring that organisations remain operational despite legal, political or financial pressure. The recommendation to establish a dedicated EU resilience mechanism for Georgian civil society further illustrates the need for targeted European support in environments where domestic authorities increasingly restrict civic space. This becomes especially important as the Georgian experience further illustrates how communication and democratic resilience become inseparable under conditions of political confrontation. Civil society organisations have assumed multiple functions extending well beyond traditional advocacy. Alongside monitoring elections, exposing corruption and providing legal assistance to detained protesters, Georgian organisations have actively countered disinformation regarding the European Union while explaining the concrete implications of reforms linked to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), anti-discrimination legislation and broader democratic standards. Their activities demonstrate that communication itself becomes a form of democratic resilience when governments seek to restrict civic space or challenge the country's European orientation. In such circumstances, maintaining informed public debate becomes inseparable from protecting democratic institutions themselves.

George Melashvili

Armenia

Civil Society Resilience through Institutional Cohesion and European Engagement

The Armenian experience demonstrates that organisational resilience depends as much on internal cohesion as on external support. Armenia's civil society has undergone repeated transformations following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, the 2020 war

and the subsequent restructuring of international donor assistance. Leadership transitions, political polarisation and the termination of major funding programmes have weakened several long-established civic networks, while organisations have increasingly been required to reorganise around new priorities, including combating disinformation and strengthening democratic resilience. These developments illustrate the risks associated with excessive dependence on individual donors or politically driven coalition-building. Sustainable resilience therefore requires organisations to maintain clear institutional values, preserve broad civic alliances beyond changing political circumstances and continuously renew cooperative networks capable of adapting to evolving democratic challenges. An important challenge is that while Armenia's growing European orientation has created significant public momentum, support for European integration remains influenced by disappointment with alternative geopolitical actors rather than by a comprehensive understanding of the European project itself. Civil society should therefore place greater emphasis on communicating the intrinsic value of European integration, highlighting its contribution to democratic governance, respect for diversity, economic modernisation and improved quality of life. Rather than framing European integration primarily as a geopolitical alternative, Armenian organisations should demonstrate its practical impact through visible examples such as infrastructure development, visa liberalisation, support for small and medium-sized enterprises, renewable energy projects and cross-border reconciliation initiatives. In doing so, public support becomes anchored in positive societal expectations rather than temporary geopolitical circumstances.

Vardine Grigoryan

Central and Eastern European Member States

Overcoming Post-accession Challenges

Although operating in a different political environment, the experiences of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria demonstrate that long-term resilience remains equally important after EU accession.

Hungary

Resilience when the Space for Civil Society Shrinks

Until very recently, Hungarian civil society faced growing financial and political pressure, including shrinking access to domestic funding, increasing support for government-organised NGOs (GONGOs), administrative burdens and attempts to intimidate civic activists. Under these circumstances, organisational resilience increasingly depends upon diversified funding sources, cooperation with municipalities, strong community support and innovative fundraising mechanisms such as corporate partnerships, micro-donations and tax designation schemes. Equally important, public trust itself constitutes a strategic resource. Organisations capable of building committed communities around their missions gain access not only to financial support but also to volunteers, advocacy networks and broader societal legitimacy capable of sustaining their activities even in politically hostile environments.

Csaba Fűzfa

Poland and Slovakia

Civil Society Resilience through Capacity and Financial Independence

Despite the growing maturity of the Polish NGO sector, organisations continue to face financial uncertainty, declining long-term volunteer engagement and uneven organisational development between larger and smaller institutions. Resilience should therefore focus on leadership renewal, professionalisation, digital capacity and stronger civic education capable of maintaining public support for democratic values.

The case of Slovakia complements this perspective by emphasising financial independence as one of the fundamental conditions of long-term resilience. The Slovak experience further shows that resilience requires diversified revenue streams, stronger local philanthropy, transparent state funding administered through independent mechanisms and a broader culture of civic self-reliance. Ultimately, democratic resilience depends upon citizens' willingness to assume responsibility rather than waiting for external actors. This conclusion reflects a theme emerging across all country experiences.

Miłosz Hodun and Mario Nicolini

Romania and Bulgaria

Civil Society Resilience beyond EU Accession

The experiences of Romania and Bulgaria demonstrate that EU membership does not eliminate structural vulnerabilities within civil society. In Romania, EU accession contributed to the professionalisation of the NGO sector and strengthened its role in monitoring governance, judicial reform and anti-corruption. However, dependence on project-based funding,

uneven organisational capacity and limited engagement outside major urban centres continue to affect long-term sustainability. Bulgaria reflects comparable challenges, particularly regarding financial dependence, limited public trust and the concentration of organisational capacity among established NGOs. At the same time, the experience of both countries shows how EU membership can provide civil society with additional instruments for resilience. Access to European funding, transnational networks and EU-level advocacy enables organisations to maintain pressure for transparency, accountability and democratic standards even when the domestic political environment becomes less supportive. Their experience therefore underlines the importance of combining European support with stronger domestic constituencies and diversified sources of funding.

Cristian David and Zinaida Zlatanova

Section 3:

Coalition-Building for Stronger Civic Action

Civil society organisations rarely achieve transformative impact in isolation. While individual organisations often possess highly specialised expertise, coalition-building enables them to combine resources, amplify advocacy efforts, strengthen public legitimacy and increase their influence on policymaking. Across both the European Union and the Eastern Partnership, coalitions have become increasingly important as governments face complex governance challenges, democratic institutions come under pressure and civil society itself operates within increasingly constrained political and financial environments. The experiences presented in this study demonstrate that successful coalitions extend beyond formal organisational alliances. They increasingly connect civil society with local authorities, academia, media, businesses, professional associations and international partners, creating broader democratic ecosystems capable of responding to societal challenges while advancing European integration.

Coalition-Building in the Eastern Partnership countries

Adaptation, Institutionalisation and Democratic Resilience

Although coalition-building takes different forms across countries, a common pattern emerges throughout the region. Rather than replacing individual organisations, coalitions enable them to retain their specific expertise while benefiting from collective action. This allows organisations to coordinate advocacy, avoid duplication of effort, share technical knowledge and present coherent policy recommendations to governments and European institutions. At the same time, coalitions contribute to democratic resilience by reducing fragmentation within civil society and creating stronger, more representative platforms capable of defending civic space during periods of political pressure. As European integration increasingly requires cooperation across multiple policy sectors, coalition-building has become not simply a useful organisational strategy but a fundamental component of effective civic participation.

Ukraine

Coalition-building as an adaptive governance mechanism

Coalition-building has become an important feature of Ukraine's civil society landscape. Among the many examples is the previously mentioned **Reanimation Package of Reforms** working on a broad range of topics. **Ukraine. Five in the Morning** unites organisations documenting war crimes committed during the Russian aggression and advocating for accountability. The **Ukrainian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum** connects organisations working on reform and European integration while linking Ukrainian civil society with peers across the Eastern Partnership and the EU. Since 2022, recovery-focused alliances have also gained prominence, including **RISE**

Ukraine, which promotes transparency and accountability in reconstruction, and the smaller, specialised **RRR4U Consortium**, focused on economic recovery and related reforms. Together, these and many other coalitions illustrate an increasingly networked civil society in which organisations combine expertise, coordinate advocacy and engage collectively with public authorities and international partners.

A distinctive feature of coalition-building in Ukraine is its diversity. Cooperation ranges from relatively structured and durable alliances to more flexible, issue-based networks that form around particular challenges or priorities. Coalition-building also connects different forms of civic engagement, bringing together specialised expertise, advocacy capacity, local knowledge and grassroots mobilisation. In this sense, Ukraine provides a particularly visible example of how flexible coalition-building can strengthen civil society's capacity to respond to rapid change, while also offering a relevant point of reference for other countries in the region where civic actors operate in similarly fluid environments.

Yana Brovdiy

Republic of Moldova

From Project-Based Coalitions to Institutionalised Cooperation

Coalition-building accelerated following the democratic changes of 2009 in the Republic of Moldova, when organisations increasingly united around common priorities including transparency, electoral reform and anti-corruption. Among the country's most influential networks are the **National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum**, the **Alliance of NGOs in the Field of Child and Family Social Protection (APSCF)** and the

Coalition for Inclusion and Non-Discrimination. These coalitions have enabled organisations to consolidate expertise across governance, human rights, environmental protection and social policy while contributing independent recommendations during Moldova's European integration process. In particular, the National Platform of the EaP Civil Society Forum has become a recognised interlocutor within Moldova-EU institutional dialogue by providing coordinated civil society input to Association Council meetings and monitoring implementation of the Association Agreement.

Nevertheless, Moldova also illustrates the structural vulnerabilities affecting many coalition-based approaches. The country's relatively small civic sector facilitates rapid mobilisation through personal networks, yet simultaneously increases competition for limited funding and contributes to fragmentation. Many coalitions remain dependent upon individual donor programmes and lack permanent governance structures, strategic planning mechanisms or sustainable membership models. Consequently, partnerships often weaken once project financing concludes. To strengthen long-term impact, attention must be given to institutionalising coalition governance, introducing transparent internal procedures, developing codes of ethics and encouraging public authorities to recognise civil society coalitions as legitimate partners throughout the EU accession process. Moreover, the forthcoming EU initiatives, including the European Civil Society Platform, Team Europe Democracy and the European Democracy Shield, provide valuable opportunities for Moldovan organisations to strengthen both domestic and cross-border cooperation, particularly with Ukrainian and Georgian partners.

Dan Nicu

Georgia

Coalition-Building in Defence of Civic Space

The Georgian case demonstrates both the strengths and the strategic importance of coalition-building under political pressure. The country has a highly networked civil society landscape in which organisations cooperate through thematic coalitions covering education, environmental protection, public health, democratic governance and community development. As civic space becomes increasingly constrained, broad coalitions have acquired additional significance by allowing organisations to pool resources, coordinate advocacy and present a unified democratic voice. There is a pressing need to deepen cooperation beyond Tbilisi by strengthening partnerships with regional organisations and grassroots initiatives capable of engaging rural communities that have traditionally remained less connected to national advocacy networks. Equally important is expanding cooperation across the Eastern Partnership, enabling organisations to exchange expertise, coordinate responses to common democratic challenges and reinforce regional solidarity in defending European values.

George Melashvili

Armenia

Building sustainable coalitions beyond donor cycles

Armenia offers another perspective on coalition dynamics. Numerous thematic alliances exist, including the **Coalition against Violence against Women**, the **Coalition for Inclusive Legal Reforms**, the **Independent Observer Public Alliance**, the **Akanates election observation mission** and child protection networks. These examples demonstrate that Armenian civil society possesses considerable experience in coordinated advocacy around

specific policy issues. At the same time, coalition-building often remains heavily influenced by donor priorities, with partnerships frequently emerging around externally funded projects rather than long-term strategic objectives. The repeated restructuring of donor programmes has therefore produced cycles of coalition formation and dissolution, reducing institutional continuity. The Armenian experience suggests that sustainable coalitions require not only financial support but also shared strategic vision and organisational commitment extending beyond individual funding cycles.

Vardine Grigoryan

Central and Eastern European member states

The experiences of Central and Eastern European member states provide valuable lessons regarding the evolution of civic coalitions before and after EU accession.

Poland

Coalition-building as a foundation for civic participation

In Poland, coalition-building has become one of the defining characteristics of the NGO sector. Cooperation among organisations, municipalities and local communities underpins the sector's ability to address diverse social needs while simultaneously strengthening civic participation. Coalition platforms facilitate strategic dialogue with public institutions, increase organisational visibility, improve coordination and reduce fragmentation within civil society. Importantly, as public attitudes towards the European Union become more cautious, strong coalitions remain indispensable for sustaining informed public debate and reaffirming democratic values. Continued cooperation with

organisations from candidate countries also enables Polish civil society to transfer practical accession experience while learning from the resilience developed by organisations operating in more difficult political environments.

Miłosz Hodun

Slovakia

Building Democratic Ecosystems through Cross-Sectoral Coalitions

Slovakia reinforces the importance of cross-sectoral cooperation, showcasing that no single institution can successfully defend democracy in isolation. The country's democratic transformation illustrates the value of broad alliances bringing together NGOs, journalists, academics, business leaders and religious communities around shared democratic objectives. The **OK98** civic campaign demonstrated how coordinated action across multiple sectors could successfully challenge authoritarian tendencies and restore Slovakia's European trajectory. More recent initiatives such as the **Fund for a Transparent Slovakia**, partnerships between businesses and watchdog organisations, the **Forum of Religions**, and regional projects including **VSquare** illustrate how coalitions can transcend traditional civil society boundaries by involving corporate actors, interfaith dialogue and cross-border investigative journalism. These experiences broaden the understanding of coalition-building from cooperation among NGOs towards the creation of comprehensive democratic ecosystems.

Mario Nicolini

Bulgaria

Broad Societal Coalitions for European Integration

Bulgaria's experience further demonstrates that successful coalition-building often extends well beyond the civil society sector itself. During Bulgaria's accession negotiations, effective communication regarding European integration relied upon unprecedented cooperation among government institutions, NGOs, local authorities, universities, schools, media organisations, business associations and civic volunteers. Rather than operating independently, these actors formed broad partnerships capable of reaching communities throughout the country and addressing citizens' practical concerns regarding EU membership. Although Bulgaria's formal umbrella organisations remain relatively limited today, the accession experience clearly illustrates that coalition-building becomes particularly effective when it incorporates multiple societal actors united around a common democratic objective.

Zinaida Zlatanova

Romania

From democratic transition coalitions to digital civic mobilisation

Romania showcases a long tradition of coalition-building linking civil society, democratic reform and, increasingly, European integration. In the early 1990s, organisations such as the **Group for Social Dialogue (GDS)** provided important platforms for intellectual debate and civic mobilisation, while cooperation between civic organisations and democratic opposition parties contributed to the emergence of the **Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR)** as a broad pro-democratic alliance. During the 2000s, as EU accession became the central reform objective, civil

society coalitions increasingly focused on electoral integrity, transparency, anti-corruption, judicial reform and government accountability. The Coalition for a Clean Parliament, for example, brought together several prominent NGOs to scrutinise electoral candidates and promote higher standards of political integrity. Such networks allowed organisations to pool expertise, coordinate advocacy and amplify their influence on both public opinion and policy-making, while cooperation with media, academia and international partners further expanded their reach.

Following EU accession, coalition-building remained important as civil society shifted from supporting Europeanisation to monitoring the implementation and preservation of democratic reforms. More recently, platforms such as **Declic** have complemented traditional NGO coalitions with digitally enabled civic mobilisation, using petitions, campaigns and collective action to engage broader constituencies. Romania therefore illustrates how coalition-building can evolve from transition-era democratic alliances into flexible advocacy networks capable of sustaining public participation, influencing policy and defending democratic standards after EU accession.

Cristian David

Hungary

Building civic coalitions before EU Accession

Hungary's case provides an important cautionary perspective. Despite the presence of numerous highly professional organisations, broad public coalitions remain relatively rare. Financial competition, political pressure and the previous government's narratives portraying NGOs as components of hostile international networks often discouraged visible cooperation. Nevertheless, organisations continue collaborating through platforms such as the **Civilizáció Coalition**, while increasingly recognising

that stronger domestic and international partnerships are essential for defending democratic values. The experience of Hungary carries an important lesson for today's candidate countries: coalition-building should begin before EU accession rather than after it. Membership in the European Union creates important opportunities for cooperation, funding and networking, but it does not eliminate risks associated with democratic backsliding. Strong civic alliances established during the accession process therefore become essential safeguards for protecting democratic institutions in the longer term.

Csaba Fűzfa

Overall Conclusion:

Civil Society, Democratic Resilience and the Future of European Integration

The comparative experiences examined throughout this publication demonstrate that civil society has evolved into one of the principal drivers of democratic transformation and European integration across both the Eastern Partnership and Central and Eastern Europe. While governments remain the formal actors negotiating accession and implementing the acquis communautaire, the long-term success of European integration depends equally on the capacity of civil society to mobilise citizens, promote democratic values, strengthen institutional accountability, monitor reforms and build societal ownership of the European project. European integration therefore emerges not solely as a governmental or institutional endeavour, but as a fundamentally societal process in which civic organisations translate European norms into everyday democratic practice.

The experiences of **Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Armenia** demonstrate that civil society has become an indispensable actor in sustaining democratic resilience under exceptionally difficult political and geopolitical circumstances. Russian aggression against Ukraine, hybrid interference targeting Moldova, democratic backsliding in Georgia, and Armenia's evolving geopolitical orientation have all required civic organisations to assume responsibilities extending far beyond traditional advocacy. Across the region, NGOs increasingly combine policy expertise with humanitarian assistance, strategic communication, election monitoring, anti-corruption efforts, legal assistance, civic education and public mobilisation. These experiences illustrate that resilient civil society is not defined by the absence of crises but by its capacity to adapt, innovate and continue advancing democratic objectives despite profound external and internal pressures.

At the same time, the historical experiences of **Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania** offer valuable lessons that remain directly relevant for today's candidate countries. Their accession processes demonstrate that successful European integration requires broad societal consensus, effective communication, cooperation between governments and civil society, and sustained investment in democratic institutions long before accession is completed. Importantly, these experiences also illustrate that EU membership does not represent the end of democratic consolidation. The challenges observed in several member states, including political polarisation, shrinking civic space and attempts to weaken independent institutions, confirm that democratic resilience requires continuous civic engagement even after accession has been achieved. European integration should therefore be understood as an ongoing democratic process rather than a finite political objective.

Taken together, the country experiences reveal several common principles that transcend national contexts.

First, **civil society functions most effectively when governments recognise it as a strategic partner rather than merely a stakeholder to be consulted**. Formal consultation mechanisms alone are insufficient unless they are accompanied by genuine participation in policymaking, implementation and evaluation. Institutionalised dialogue, transparent cooperation and mutual trust allow civil society organisations to contribute expertise while increasing the legitimacy and public ownership of reforms.

Second, **effective communication remains one of the most important determinants of successful European integration**. Across all countries, contributors emphasise that European integration cannot be communicated exclusively through technical language or institutional achievements. Citizens engage with European policies when they understand their practical implications for local communities, public services, economic opportunities and democratic rights. The Bulgarian experience demonstrates the value of decentralised communication, volunteer engagement and broad partnerships involving media, universities, businesses and local authorities, while Moldova, Armenia and Georgia illustrate the continuing need for localised messaging capable of addressing diverse social groups and countering increasingly sophisticated disinformation campaigns.

Third, **organisational resilience has become a strategic prerequisite for democratic resilience**. Financial sustainability, leadership succession, professionalisation, digital security, crisis preparedness and institutional learning are no longer purely managerial concerns but essential conditions enabling civil society to perform its democratic functions. The experiences of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia particularly demonstrate that organisations operating under conditions of war, hybrid threats or

political pressure require both internal adaptability and predictable external support if they are to maintain long-term impact.

Fourth, **coalition-building significantly amplifies the effectiveness of civil society action**. Throughout the region, successful coalitions enable organisations to combine expertise, coordinate advocacy, strengthen policy influence and reduce fragmentation. The Ukrainian reform coalitions, Moldova's National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, Georgia's thematic civic networks, Poland's collaborative NGO ecosystem and Slovakia's broad democratic alliances all demonstrate that durable democratic progress is rarely achieved through isolated organisational efforts. Increasingly, successful coalitions extend beyond civil society itself, incorporating municipalities, academic institutions, businesses, independent media and professional associations into broader democratic partnerships.

The comparative analysis also demonstrates that **cross-border cooperation represents one of the most valuable assets available to European civil society**. The relationship between EU member states and the Eastern Partnership should not be viewed as a one-directional transfer of expertise from experienced democracies to aspiring members. Certainly, Poland, Slovakia and Bulgaria offer practical lessons regarding accession, communication strategies, institutional reforms and civic participation. However, the experiences of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia equally provide valuable innovations in democratic resilience developed under conditions of military aggression, hybrid warfare and systemic political pressure. European civil society therefore benefits from reciprocal learning, where historical accession experience is complemented by contemporary innovations in crisis response, societal mobilisation and organisational adaptation.

Several practical recommendations emerge consistently from the contributors.

For **civil society organisations**, priorities include investing in long-term organisational resilience through diversified funding, leadership development, digital transformation and crisis preparedness; strengthening permanent coalitions capable of sustaining cooperation beyond individual donor projects; expanding partnerships with local authorities, businesses, universities and independent media; improving strategic communication through locally tailored messaging and greater engagement with rural communities; and increasing cross-border cooperation within both the Eastern Partnership and the broader European civic space.

For **national governments**, the principal challenge is creating an enabling environment in which civil society can contribute fully to democratic governance. This requires institutionalising participatory policymaking, ensuring transparent and depoliticised funding mechanisms, reducing unnecessary administrative burdens, protecting civic freedoms and recognising civil society coalitions as legitimate partners in reform implementation and EU accession.

For **European Union institutions**, the findings point towards the need for stronger long-term support for civil society resilience. Contributors consistently advocate great-

er emphasis on core institutional funding alongside project financing, simplified grant procedures for smaller organisations, expanded peer-learning initiatives, stronger support for cross-border partnerships and more robust protection of civic space where democratic standards are under pressure. The emerging initiatives under the European Democracy Shield, the European Civil Society Platform and the forthcoming EU Strategy for Civil Society represent important opportunities to strengthen these objectives.

Looking ahead, the role of civil society is likely to become even more significant as the European Union prepares for future enlargement. Candidate countries face an increasingly complex geopolitical environment characterised by military conflict, foreign information manipulation and interference, cyber threats, democratic polarisation and declining public trust in institutions. Under such conditions, resilient civil society organisations will continue to serve as essential democratic intermediaries connecting European institutions, national governments and local communities.

The next phase of European integration will therefore depend not only on the ability of governments to negotiate accession chapters or implement legislative reforms, but equally on the strength of civic institutions capable of embedding these reforms within society. Democratic resilience cannot be imported through legislation alone. It must be cultivated through active citizenship, strong civic organisations, broad societal coalitions and continuous public engagement.

Ultimately, the comparative experiences presented in this publication reinforce a broader conclusion: **civil society should**

no longer be regarded as an accompanying component of European integration but as one of its principal strategic foundations. It serves simultaneously as advocate, watchdog, educator, innovator, service provider and democratic safeguard. By strengthening accountability, fostering participation, promoting democratic values and connecting citizens with European institutions, civil society transforms European integration from a predominantly political project into a shared societal endeavour. As Europe enters a new phase of enlargement and confronts increasingly complex democratic challenges, investing in resilient, cooperative and independent civil society will remain one of the most effective long-term investments in the future of the European project itself.

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