

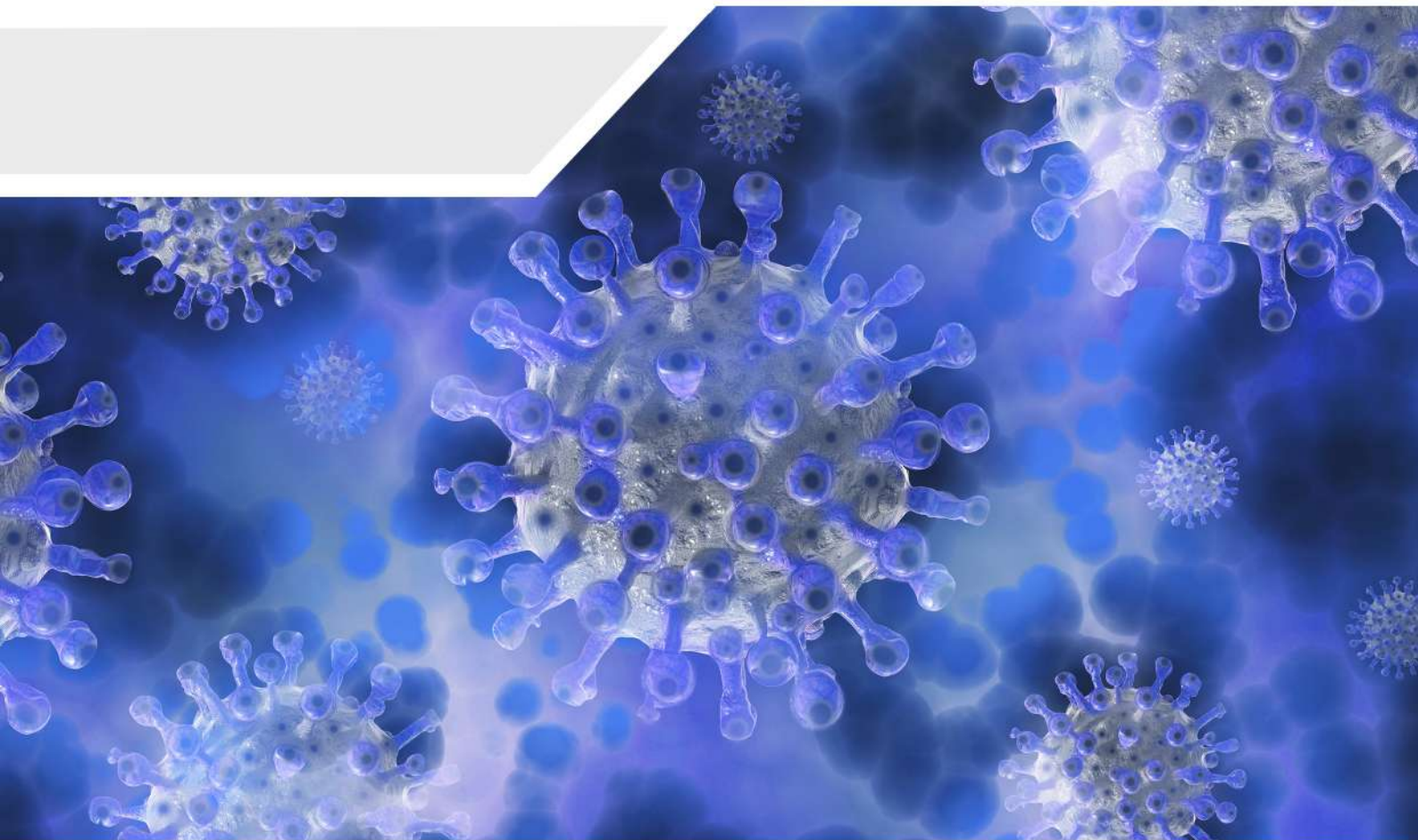
Decentralisation and Local Self-government in Eastern Partnership countries

EaP CSF **COVID-19** POLICY PAPER

#PrepareEaP4Health

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Decentralisation and Local Self-government in Eastern Partnership countries

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Executive Summary

This policy paper analyses the implementation of the European Principles of Decentralisation in the Eastern Partnership countries. The focus here is on the following aspects: 1) transparency of decision-making; 2) the development of digital services; 3) the availability of digital community information; 4) the participation of civil society in decision-making and; 5) the level of decentralisation of local budgets. Special attention was paid to the analysis of the challenges COVID-19 poses to local self-government.

A set of recommendations for strengthening decentralisation processes in the Eastern Partnership countries has been developed. The EU is encouraged to **strengthen its support to the Eastern Partnership countries and their civil societies in further developing gender budgeting at the local level and implementing inter-municipal cooperation**. Separate recommendations are aimed at Eastern Partnership countries. The dependence of local budgets on transfers from the central budget, as well as imbalance in territorial development, restrain the ability of local authorities in EaP countries to provide necessary services. EU and EU member states' support to the EaP countries in strengthening the capacity of local budgets should be aimed at developing institutional capacity and balancing local community development.

All EaP countries have problems related to strategic planning, transparency, accountability in budget spending decisions, and low levels of civil society influence on decision-making. Thus, it is advisable that the EU and EU member states focus on **strengthening leadership development programs for local authorities and civil society**. At the same time, **local economic communities in EaP countries would benefit from the implementation of effective mechanisms for public and private partnership**, thus allowing central funds to be redirected to local actors in various socioeconomic areas that central governments do not properly cater to. At present, the potential of the business sector in diversifying municipal services and protecting public interests remains underutilized, which could also decrease negative opinions of central governments. Indeed, in EaP countries trust levels toward CSOs and volunteers are higher than in government initiatives. Only in Georgia, the trust level towards CSOs is declining. The actions of CSOs and volunteers in Belarus and Ukraine have become decisive in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, their potential is declining, thus EU initiatives should aim at **supporting and strengthening the financial capacity of CSOs**.

Armenia is showing progress in the development of E-services, access to digital information, and well-developed inter-municipal cooperation in tax data collection. At the same time, disparity in the regional development of communities is affecting their economic potential and capacity. Also, the high centralization of financial resources in the central budget makes local governments dependent on the central government rather than the local community. It is therefore recommended to **implement measures that will strengthen fiscal decentralisation and the equalization of territorial development**. Additionally, efforts should be made to develop cooperation between local authorities and local CSOs.

Azerbaijan demonstrates a high concentration of power in the President's administration and large gaps between the development of Baku and other regions. The advocacy activities of CSOs are limited although, on paper, they can participate in the discussion and authoritative decision-making processes. CSOs are mainly concentrated in Baku. This significantly limits the ability of regions to influence decision-making. It is recommended to **develop the capacity of local CSOs and pursue a policy to reduce inequalities in the development of local communities. In addition, it is necessary to create an institutional basis for decentralisation and development of inter-municipal cooperation**.

Belarus is the only EaP country which has not signed the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Local governments are highly centralized and dependent on the central government. Local decision-making is not transparent. Recognizing the high level of centralization tends to put the focus on the central government level rather than the local level. This holds particularly true for decisions and processes related to budgeting. Official data provoke mistrust and repression, making CSOs' activities very risky. Despite being under great pressure, CSOs demonstrate strength and a high potential in counteracting manipulation and cooperate via Internet tools and social networks. Notably, initiatives from CSOs and volunteers were decisive during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is recommended to **develop CSO competences to assess and influence local budgets. The European Charter of Local Self-Government should also be signed in order to create an institutional framework for the development of local communities.**

Georgia demonstrates progress in the development of local self-government, building inter-municipal cooperation, the participation of CSOs in decision-making, and the availability of E-governance and digital services. At the same time, public confidence in CSOs is declining thus creating a need to **develop the communication and transparency of CSOs activities.**

The mechanism for CSOs participation in local initiatives and decision-making continues to develop in **Moldova**. However, local budgets are highly dependent on transfers from the central budget. Successful inter-municipal cooperation for the development of rural areas and solving other local problems (for example, water treatment) has been noted. It is recommended to **strengthen fiscal decentralisation and increase the effectiveness of the CSO's participation in local decision-making.**

Ukraine's progress in decentralisation reform is demonstrated by increasing the financial capacity of local budgets, developing inter-municipal cooperation, and raising access to E-services and digital information on local communities. The main problem for the development of decentralisation is posed by the military-civil administrations in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Whereas this form of territorial administration is not defined in Ukraine's Constitution, the specificities related to the status of the post-conflict territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, now under Ukrainian governmental control, require special attention for the development of decentralisation mechanisms and tools. Important aspects including proximity to the combat zone, the competence of potential united communities, the real managerial capacity of future communities must be taken into account. Therefore, the development of specific models of local self-government is required. The **further advancement of decentralisation reform requires Constitutional amendment aimed at strengthening the capacity of district and oblast self-government bodies and crystalizing executive body powers on the sub-regional and regional levels.**

1. Analysis of the implementation of the European Principles of Decentralisation in the context of the 11th Deliverable of the 20 Deliverables for 2020, “Support the implementation of public administration reform”

This part analyses the degree of the implementation of European Principles of Decentralisation. It should be noted that the EaP countries vary greatly. For instance, Belarus remains the only country which has not yet signed the Charter of Local Self-Government, while in Ukraine, local authorities have received lot of powers. Thus, each country’s approach to solving the decentralisation dilemmas i.e., the share of resources to be redistributed through the state budget and how much power to transfer to the local level, also varies. The implementation of Deliverable 11 primarily concerns the delegated powers of local authorities.

At the same time, the progress in the implementation of the initiatives “Citizens' engagement for better policies and services increased in line with the Open Partnership” (European Commission, 2017) can improve the quality of services of own powers of local governments. Here, particular attention will be paid to transparency in decision–making, E-government, corruption perceptions and local business development initiatives.

The Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index (CSOSI) (Table 1) assesses the ability of civil society to be a partner for implementing and participating in community development (USAID, 2020, p.21-39; p.93; p.139; p.224). It enables local civil society to assess the environment in which they operate and their ability to protect, sustainably operate and communicate with citizens. The CSOSI measures both successes and failures in seven key components: legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, service delivery, industry infrastructure and public image. Here, the CSOSI gives us a quick overview of the involvement of CSOs in community development in EaP countries. With results between 3.2 and 5.9, it is clear civil society in EaP countries, even in the better-ranked states, face tremendous obstacles to the conduct of their activities.

Table 1. Civil Society Organization Sustainability Ranking

Country	Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index (1-3 - enhanced; 3-5 - evolving; 5-7 - impeded)
Ukraine	3.2
Armenia	3.6
the Republic of Moldova	3.8
Georgia	4.0
Belarus	5.5
Azerbaijan	5.9

Freedom House’s take on Local Democratic Governance considers the following aspects: the decentralisation of power; responsibility, election and capacity of local governments, and; the transparency and accountability of local authorities. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. Its ranking of local democracy governance of EaP countries is provided in Table 2 (Freedom House. (2020). Belarus and Azerbaijan are highly centralized on the presidential administration. Regional and local government bodies have little authority, they are underfunded, and entirely dependent on the national executive. The local administration is carried out by executive authorities, the heads of which are appointed by, and accountable only to the president. Armenia’s local governments are not decentralized, but under the current authorities, local governance is not as politicized as in the past. The local self-government

and decentralisation reform in Georgia and the Republic of Moldova have their ups and downs. In both countries, local government is highly dependent on transfers from the central budget. Ukraine has shown the best progress among the EaP countries in local self-government due to the successful community integration process and increased financial capacity. However, the decentralisation reform is not yet complete.

Table 2. Local Democracy Governance Ranking

Country	Local Democratic Governance
Belarus	1.25
Azerbaijan	1.5
Armenia	2.25
the Republic of Moldova	2.5
Georgia	2.75
Ukraine	3.25

It is important to understand that E-government is a means to improve service delivery, increase citizen involvement, enhance transparency, accountability and inclusion and, ultimately, improve the lives of society as a whole. It is from this point of view that the availability of E-government services need to be assessed. Promoting citizen participation is the cornerstone of socially inclusive governance. E-participation initiatives should therefore aim to improve citizen's access to information and public services, and promote participation in public decision-making that affects the well-being of society in general and the individual in particular. Digital representation of local self-government is growing within all of the EaP countries. However, the opportunities for online civil society participation and the level of transparency in decision-making vary widely across the regions.

Although the development of E-government is an increasing priority in policy agendas, the focus on digital transformation of government still remains at the national level. However, city and municipal administrations are the ones that interact more directly with residents and are responsible for solving problems in people's daily lives, thus local E-government matters must also be addressed.

Table 3. E-Government Development Index & E-participation Index (UN, 2020)

Country	E-Government Development Index	E-participation Index
Belarus	40	57
Georgia	65	80
Armenia	68	57
Ukraine	69	46
Azerbaijan	70	73
The Republic of Moldova	79	55

The information in Table 3 - the E-Government Development Index & E-participation Index results, was derived from an analysis of approximately 193 countries. The E-Government Development Index includes access characteristics such as infrastructure and education levels to reflect how a country uses information technologies to facilitate access and engage its population (UN, 2020). It also lists the Electronic Participation Index which provides an understanding of citizens' opportunities to use online services, provide information to citizens (electronic information

exchange), interact with stakeholders (electronic consultation), and participate in decision-making processes (electronic decision making).

The expert survey conducted for this paper illustrates EaP countries progress profile of the implementation of Deliverable 11 (ANNEX 3). According to the surveyed experts, not a single EaP country has scored 5 (excellent) on any of the points. Almost all countries are showing progress in the development of digital services, service-centre one-stop-shops and/or e-government services, and the availability of digital community information. However, there are still many problems in the openness of local government decision-making, the transparency of local budgets, and cooperation with civil society

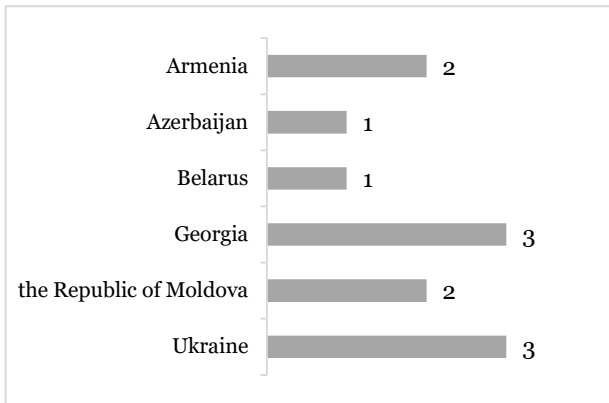


Figure 1. Strategic planning and transparency of local self-government decision-making in the EaP countries.

The availability of E-services and digitalization to communities is important especially in times of quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital services such as the ability to register a business or get other documentations make local self-government more inclusive and accessible. Despite the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic led to the development of digital technologies and services, experts did not assess the digitalization of local self-government in the EaP countries very well (Fig. 2).

The first section of the expert questionnaire (ANNEX 1) was the assessment of the local self-government decision-making. Experts assessed that Georgia and Ukraine have the best indicator of transparency in local self-government decision-making among the EaP countries (Fig. 1). The least transparent decisions are made by local self-government in Azerbaijan and Belarus.

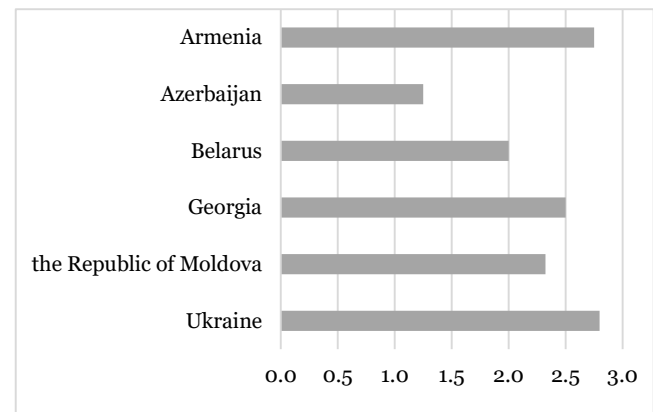
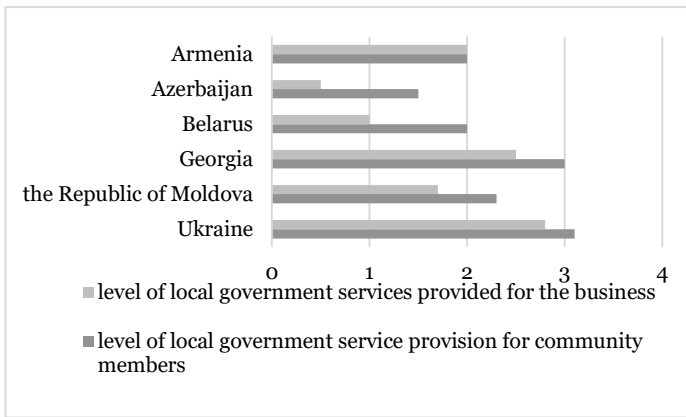


Figure 2. Level of digitalization of local self-government

However, it should be noted that there are highly developed digital communities in every EaP country, and those in which access to digital services, information, and even high-quality high-speed Internet access remain problematic.

Experts noted that the digital services provided by local self-governments have improved accessibility and transparency, and have also accelerated the transfer of information. All experts note the progress in the implementation of digital services at the local level, but very slow.



The expert survey showed that EaP countries with more developed local self-government and greater independence in forming local budgets provide better services (Fig. 3).

Georgia and Ukraine stand out as countries where local self-government provides high service, and Azerbaijan and Belarus, where service for business is very low. This is due to the high centralization of local budgets, which is shown in the next section.

Figure 3. Assessment of the level of local government services.

Opportunities for civil society participation in local self-government come through the advocacy institutions, citizen budgets, and other initiatives. Civil society in all EaP countries has the opportunity to lobby self-governments, but their actual influence on decision-making varies. Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine offer more opportunities for civil society to influence local self-government (Fig. 4).

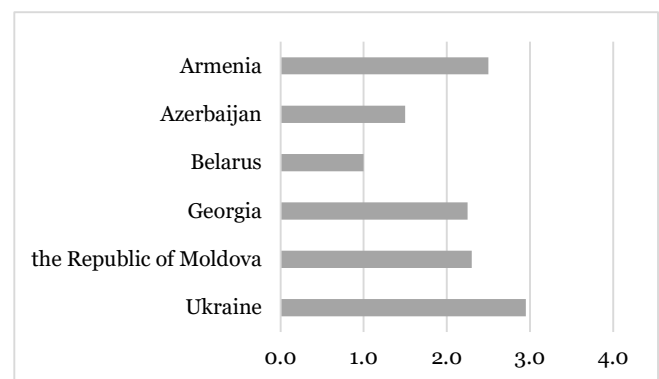


Figure 4. Level of civil society participation in local self-government

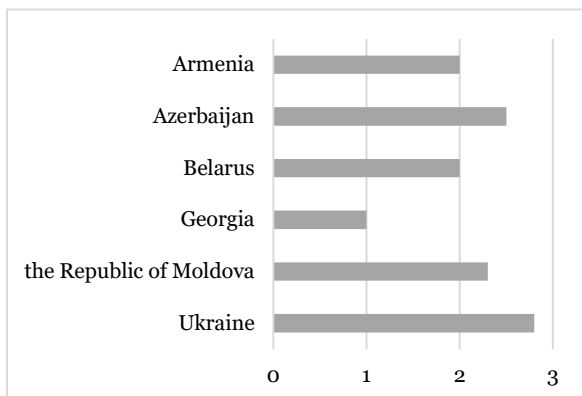


Figure 5. Gender Balance in local self-government representation

Local self-governments make decisions related to schooling (from preschool to secondary education), primary health care, transport, etc. Traditionally, women encounter more problems in these areas than men, as they are more often engaged in child or relative care. Accordingly, the representation of women in local self-government will allow them to make more effective decisions in these areas. Thus, attention was also paid to the gender balance in local self-government (Fig. 5).

The results of the expert survey correlate with the international rankings of the EaP countries.

Armenia

In Armenia, the advocacy potential of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) has improved and CSO coalitions have demonstrated a stronger influence on public policymaking. Several previously implemented donor projects, which focused on strengthening CSOs' oversight of government efforts to improve transparency and accountability have also improved civil society's ability to engage with

national and local authorities. CSOs can access information on proposed legal acts at www.e-draft.am and may submit comments and recommendations on the proposed legislation on this website. However, some CSOs believe that this platform has limited effectiveness due to the lack of significant discussions and communication with state authorities (USAID, 2020).

Local authorities were more cooperative, transparent and supportive of CSOs initiatives than the central authorities. For example, the NGO Partnership and Learning reported local municipalities in Tatev, Tegh, Goris, and Sisan were very cooperative. Local municipalities provided all the necessary data for the study and arranged activities to present the results. Based on the recommendations provided, they also expressed a willingness to introduce certain changes to their future activities (USAID, 2020).

Azerbaijan

The 2014 Law on Public Participation provides a legal basis for citizen participation in governance through a variety of mechanisms, including Public Councils, which serve as consultative bodies to the government. Notably, the practice of discussing draft laws publicly and with the participation of independent experts and CSOs has improved. However, other advocacy instruments (such as the possibility for 40,000 citizens to initiate a law and mahalla committees (voluntary unions of local residents under the Law on the Status of Municipalities) remain underutilized due to the lack of relevant mechanisms and practices (USAID, 2020).

Existing CSOs advocacy platforms include the National NGO Forum, Anticorruption Coalition, South Caucasus Women Congress, National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), and OGP Platform. Despite these platforms, CSO advocacy continues to be limited, especially in the regions and advocacy capacity remains limited mostly to Baku-based CSOs. In the regions, it is also limited by the *de facto* requirement to obtain approval from the local executive authorities prior to organizing any public events. Social media usage is increasing in Azerbaijan, and social networks present great potential as an advocacy tool. This notwithstanding, regional CSOs are not well-versed in the use of social media and even Baku-based CSOs do not make full use of this medium (USAID, 2020).

Belarus

In Belarus, there are no effective mechanisms for lobbying or advocacy. CSOs must operate in an unfavourable legal environment. They depend largely on international grants and have very limited opportunities to influence the decision-making process. In Brest, citizens successfully protested to shut down the IPower battery factory because of the harm it caused to the environment and people's health. Despite their activism, they were unable to achieve any real results.

In 2019, the Law on Normative Legal Acts entered into force. It establishes minimum time limits for conducting public discussions, obliges state bodies to publish the results of public discussions, and regulates mechanisms of online discussions. The authorities occasionally invite individual experts to meetings and working groups. However, practice shows it has not increased CSOs' opportunities to participate in decision-making processes.

Almost every government agency has a public council in which CSOs participate. However, these councils do not operate according to uniform standards or regulatory principles. The selection criteria for CSOs are unclear and biased and the selection procedures are not transparent. The mandates of public councils are generally extremely limited, and discussions may not affect future decisions.

Online activism, e.g., the Petitions.by platform for signing petitions, is increasingly popular among Belarusians (USAID, 2020). This is partly due to the fact that other opportunities and mechanisms are ineffective and/or difficult to use.

Georgia

While CSOs play an important role in terms of policy impact, particularly in elections, human rights, gender equality, and minority rights, their work is affected by low public trust, participation and support, as well as the current government's limited openness to collaborate.

In general, the government is willing to cooperate with donors and CSOs on non-controversial issues, such as rural development, education, health care, environment, and waste management. CSOs participate in many advisory bodies and government working groups; their participation is often ceremonial.

Very little information is available on civil society within Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both territories are controlled by Moscow-backed authorities. It is nonetheless clear that the CSOs in those regions operate in a radically different environment and are subject to substantially more political pressure than those operating in the rest of Georgia (USAID, 2020).

The Republic of Moldova

Mechanisms for the participation of CSOs in local decision-making processes continue to develop. Since 2018, local public administrations are required to add: all decisions of local and district councils, mayoral orders, orders of the district president, the acts of the praetor, and other acts include into the State Register of Local Acts. This facilitates the monitoring of the local authority's activities by all citizens and including CSOs. Despite the society's active participation in consultations with local authorities, grievances that civil society's proposals are not taken into account during decision-making have also been submitted.

Formal mechanisms to ensure CSO participation in the decision-making process continue to develop. Together with other CSOs, the National LEADER Network in Moldova, has successfully introduced the LEADER concept (an EU method) for putting rural development on the public agenda and aimed at revitalizing rural areas and job creation at the local level.

Markedly, the CSOs operating in the Transnistrian region are subjected to various forms of pressure, including travel bans for human rights defenders, intimidation by local security officials, and criminal prosecutions (USAID, 2020).

Ukraine

With support from UCIPR, the USAID Citizens in Action Project and the Council of Europe project Promoting Civil Participation in Democratic Decision-Making in Ukraine, CSOs actively and successfully advocated for the introduction of local democracy charters and procedures, including public hearings, e-petitions, and public consultations. Campaigns were implemented successfully in a number of cities including Ternopil, Zhytomyr, and Drohobych. A growing number of tools is facilitating electronic interaction between the government and citizens. For example, since 2019, the online Platform for Local E-Democracy, a local e-petition system, has allowed citizens to vote on participatory budgets. The Smart Interaction System, developed by Young Community Foundation, allows entrepreneurs, residents, and donors to be actively involved in community life. In total, sixty-four communities from twenty-one oblasts have joined this system.

However, there are problems with the occupied territories (Crimea, the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and the so-called Luhansk People's Republic). According to the Constitution of Ukraine, the rights of local self-government must be observed there. However, the legal status of these territories is unclear since there is a civil-military administration in part of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions which is not provided for by the Constitution of Ukraine. Furthermore, those citizens exercising their right to local self-government in these territories, are subjected to harassment (USAID, 2020).

2. Decentralisation: powers of local-government and local budgets

In analysing the financial capacity of local governments, the European Charter of Local Self-Government was taken as a starting point:

“Local authorities' financial resources shall be commensurate with the responsibilities provided for by the constitution and the law. The protection of financially weaker local authorities calls for the institution of financial equalization procedures or equivalent measures which are designed to correct the effects of the unequal distribution of potential sources of finance and of the financial burden they must support. Such procedures or measures shall not diminish the discretion local authorities may exercise within their own sphere of responsibility. As far as possible, grants to local authorities shall not be earmarked for the financing of specific projects. The provision of grants shall not remove the basic freedom of local authorities to exercise policy discretion within their own jurisdiction (Council of Europe, 1985).”

The choice between centralization or decentralisation requires compromise and decisive rules for the best development of local self-government, efficient service delivery and efficient use of limited financial resources. The reform process in the EaP countries is aimed at improving all of the aforementioned. It thereby provides for the addition of small territorial communities and the implementation of digital services.

Armenia

In 2011, the Armenian Government adopted the concept of municipal amalgamation. The process was launched in three pilot clusters (Dilijan, Tumanyan, and Tatev) between 2015 and 2016, following local referenda in those municipalities. The process continues; to date, 465 settlements have been regrouped into 52 amalgamated communities.

Armenia's local governments are not decentralized. The governance structure in Armenia, combined with limited local revenues, leaves the country's provinces and communities dependent on budget allocations from the central government. The prime minister has paid frequent visits to the regions to check on the development of this reform. Notably, under the current authorities, local governance is not as politicized as it has been in the past (Freedom House, 2020).

Local governments and communities need fiscal autonomy to be independent and set need-based priorities rather than waiting for central government subventions. The existing legislation creates a hierarchy in which the central government may express concerns to community leaders. However, the public cannot. A 2019 International Monetary Fund (IMF) report on fiscal transparency in Armenia noted, “local governments are highly reliant on central government transfers, which account for 80 percent of their funding.” (International Monetary Fund, 2019)

Azerbaijan

In Azerbaijan, power is highly centralized in the presidential administration. Regional and local government bodies have limited authorities. They are underfunded and entirely dependent on the national executive.

Local administration is carried out by executive authorities, the heads of which are appointed by, and accountable only to, the president. While there are no regional or local legislatures, local municipal councils are elected, but they are underfunded and their responsibilities (often doubled by national agencies), are restricted to matters such as road management, cemetery maintenance, and parks and environmental preservation (Freedom House, 2020).

Notably, there is a massive development gap between the capital Baku and the rest of the country. The GDP per capita in Baku is 11.5 times higher than in the regions (International Monetary Fund, 2019). There are fewer than 20 doctors per 10,000 people in 48 of Azerbaijan's 60 regions; in Baku, the figure is 89. In 18 regions, fewer than 20 percent of residents are served by sewage systems, and there are only 10 regions where the figure rises above 40 percent.

Therefore, it is necessary to align the gap in regional development through inter- budgetary transfers. This situation creates donor regions and recipient regions. In the context of a shortage of financial resources, budgetary alignment of regional development can lead to a diffusion of resources and levelling the development of donor regions.

Belarus

Local governance in Belarus is highly centralized. The president personally appoints and dismisses the heads of territorial entities all the way down to the district level. Local self-government bodies (i.e., local councils) are financially and legally constrained; they act as consultative adjuncts to local executive committees. In turn, their decision-making powers are directed by the central government. Local councils approve local budgets, local tax rates and rules for the use of local public property. They have no influence over the appointment of heads of the local executive committees. Conversely, the executive committees prepare draft budgets, perform actual management tasks, and represent their regions before other state bodies.

Local authorities receive most of their funding from the central government. The allocation of funding is based on so-called social standards which are set by various ministries. Markedly, they often do not take local specificities into account. The economic gap between Minsk, the capital, and the regions continued to grow throughout 2019. The local authorities do not set any goals for themselves when forming budgets and do not try to resolve any problems. The main category of recipients of budgetary funds is budgetary organizations. For them, the use of budgetary funds provides for special obligations, conditions and methods of control. It is beneficial for local authorities to increase the number of budgetary state organizations, but there is absolutely no motivation to develop private businesses (Glagoleva, 2019).

The local budget does not depend on the presence or absence of taxpayers on its territory but rather on the number of recipients of budget funds. Although formally all budgetary activities are focused on attaining social standards, the assessment of the results is not conducted by the local community, but by representatives of interested departments. As a result, there are simply no mechanisms in Belarus through which residents of specific settlements can influence social security standards (Glagoleva, 2019).

Although local budgets are formed in Belarus, the formation process is closed (i.e., secret, with unknown participants, hidden from the public and from the deputies of local Councils of Deputies themselves). Almost all local Council Deputy budgets are subsidized and unprofitable. In general, civil society has made few attempts to influence budget processes at the local level. Financial centralization in Belarus is of concern, which makes effective work of local authorities impossible.

Georgia

Main goal of Georgia's decentralisation reform is developing a public administration system which will stimulate municipalities to increase their revenues through local economic activities. The implementation of the powers of local authorities depends on transfers from the central budget. Such a system does not ensure the independence of municipalities. Rather, it hinders their economic development and the development of the country as a whole. Should the current system continue to exist, the provision of services to the regional communities from the state budget will become even more unmanageable. This will foreseeably lead to increased levels of inequality between Tbilisi and other municipalities (GYLA, 2019).

The Republic of Moldova

Moldova's administrative-territorial system reform was the former government's strategic priority for 2016-2020. In November 2018, a group of experts presented a gap analysis of the existing administrative-territorial system (e.g., the dependence of municipalities on transfers from the central government) and proposals for promoting reforms. However, due to Moldova's difficult political situation, the reforms did not advance at all in 2019 (Guvernul, 2018).

Ukraine

Ukraine's decentralisation reform successfully reached its goal of increasing the capacity of local budgets. Accordingly, small, financially insolvent communities were united with more powerful communities. By 2020, one thousand and two united territorial communities had been voluntarily created in Ukraine, and local budget revenues increased by 14 percent in 2019 (Ministry for Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine, 2019). Notably, this voluntary consolidation of 1,002 communities covers over 41 percent of Ukraine's territory and accounts for almost 30 percent of the population (Freedom House, 2020). Yet, local authorities remain dependant on the national government for decisions related to transfers and budgets. To solve this problem, the government has drafted an administrative-territorial plan for each region (oblast) with new borders; some of the boundaries of already united communities are also to be changed. Markedly, this plan has not been implemented fully (The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2019). Fiscal decentralisation is progressing most successfully in Ukraine although much remains to be done.

3. Cooperation to implement local initiatives: local authorities – public organizations – business

Oftentimes, local problems can only be effectively resolved by local authorities through cooperation with other communities (i.e., inter-municipal cooperation, local businesses, or civil society). For example, building a waste recycling plant, or resolving an environmental problem. The success of solving such problems will depend on the ability of local authorities to establish a professional network for cooperation. The importance of this capacity for local democracy is reflected in the fact that a special law on inter-municipal cooperation is established (Shahbazyan, 2020).

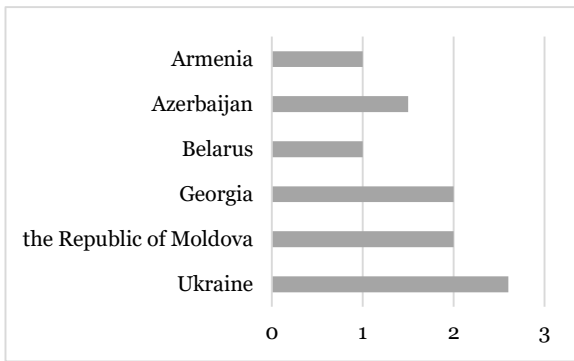


Figure 6 shows the survey results of the expert assessments of inter-municipal cooperation. Although the development of inter-municipal cooperation is declared by law in all EaP countries, their success rates vary. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine show progress in the development of inter-municipal cooperation. Conversely, in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus, inter-municipal cooperation was rated by experts at 1 and 1.5 points out of 5.

Figure 6. Level of inter-municipal cooperation

In a highly centralized environment, municipalities compete with each other for transfers from the central budget. Therefore, higher centralization relates to lower levels of developed horizontal partnerships - inter-municipal cooperation. Questions in the expert survey aimed at assessing the effectiveness of building inter-municipal cooperation, cooperation with business and with the civil society review. Due to the imposed limitations of the study at hand, international inter-municipal cooperation was not focused on. Only a few publicly available examples of successful international, inter-municipal cooperation can be cited. They relate to the effectiveness of inter-municipal cooperation within the country, border regions, and municipalities - international partners. Improving the provision of several public services through inter-municipal cooperation is the goal of five grants provided by an EU-funded project in Armenia, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova. Examples of services that will be supported include better waste management, water supply, road maintenance, and tourism development (EU NEIGHBOURS, 2017).

The success of the dialogue between business and local authorities is reflected in the number of initiatives supported by business. The expert survey included the question "Local business is actively involved in the implementation of social initiatives of local government", which assesses the success of cooperation between local government and business. Figure 7 shows that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are more successful.

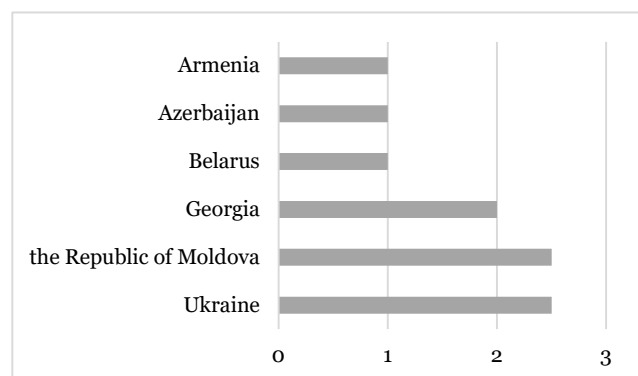


Figure 7. Level involved business in the implementation of social initiatives of local government



Another characteristic that shows the success of interaction between local authorities, business and civil society is dialogue and consultation. Several experts noted that in Georgia and Ukraine, when implementing business projects, public consultation is always carried out. Complete answers to this question are presented in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Communication and dialog of business, local government, and civil society through the implementation of local projects.

Country profile of cooperation in the implementation of local initiatives: local authorities - public organizations - business can be seen in the ANNEX 4. The analysis of the profiles of the EaP countries shows that all of them have successful partnerships between local authorities and business. Successful business development means the flow of investments, the creation of jobs and an increase in budget revenues, so local authorities are directly interested in its development. However, building inter-municipal cooperation and cooperation with civil society still requires progress.

Armenia

In Armenia, the Law on Inter-Municipal Unions is in force (Shahbazyan, 2020). By decision of the local council, municipalities can establish inter-municipal voluntary associations to exercise their powers. At the initiative of the Government of the Republic of Armenia, a mandatory inter-municipal union may be established for delegated powers (Shahbazyan, 2020). However, the status of previously created unions of legal entities, municipal associations or inter-municipality unions remains uncertain. There is no information available on how many municipal or inter-municipal associations have been re-registered or reorganized.

Access to the electronic platform (e-register.am) of the State Register of Legal Entities of the Ministry of Justice is geographically limited. Notably, cooperation between municipalities exists for the joint coordination and collection of databases relating to property tax and land tax.

Since 2018, Armenia's Law on Petitions allows for the use of petitions as a mechanism for initiating local initiatives by civil society. Whereas the contents of the petitions which have been filed since differed somewhat per municipality, the essence was about creating an eco-economic environment in the municipality and banning metal mining in the municipalities (Shahbazyan, 2020).

Azerbaijan

Inter-municipal cooperation has never been a discussion point on the public agenda in Azerbaijan.

Rather, discussions about the limits of municipal powers, their financial potential, property and ownership issues, as well as the state of their relations with public structures and the amalgamation of municipalities have been on the agenda for some time. The inter-municipal cooperation model becomes an effective mechanism where local self-governance powers are gained through an exclusive right. In turn, Azerbaijan's official policy in recent years was geared towards establishing larger municipalities (Mirzayev, 2015).

Belarus

There is insufficient information on the development of cooperation between municipalities in Belarus. However, the mechanism for building inter-municipal cooperation is considered an important component of Russian-Belarusian integration (Azarov, 2017). Alongside the policy of good neighbourliness, the cooperation between border regions is developing.

Georgia

In Georgia, resolving a waste management problem in the region of Adjara serves as an example which called for inter-municipal cooperation. Within the framework of an inter-municipal cooperation project, supported by the Council of Europe (CoE), in the Adjarian mountain municipalities of Keda, Shuakhevi, and Khulo inter-municipal cooperation geared at waste management was established. A Center for the Development of Municipal Services has been established in Kede. It is to take over municipal services for three mountain municipalities (EU, Council for Europe, 2017).

The Republic of Moldova

Cooperation between the local communities of Moldova and its breakaway state of Transnistria was established to improve water supply, sewerage infrastructure, as well as to protect water and soil resources along the Dniester. This cooperation was supported by the German Government and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Such inter-municipal cooperation is particularly difficult due to political conflict and disputed territories. In this case, the societal and health consequences of poor water supply and sanitation in the region are prioritised development problems requiring resolution (GIZ, 2016).

Ukraine

In Ukraine, there is a law that defines the organizational and legal basis for cooperation of territorial communities, principles, forms, mechanisms of such cooperation, its stimulation, financing, and control (The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2014). A special program to support inter-municipal cooperation is also available. The essence of it is to conduct annual competitions for inter-municipal cooperation projects with appropriate funding from the regional budget. Program activities should promote cooperation between local authorities, increase project management professionalism of local government representatives and expand their participation in national and international programs.

Cooperation between local communities is based on cooperation agreements. Inter-municipal cooperation is usually established to solve water supply, waste or garbage recycling problems, and create safety centres (emergency medical care, police, state emergency service, rescue teams, video surveillance and crisis response system) (DESPRO, 2020). For example, to establish a modern integrated solid waste management system, three communities with over 26,000 residents (the town of Tulchyn, Kynashiv village council comprised of Kynashiv, Mazurivka, Nestervarka, and, Suvorovske village council comprised of the rural settlement of Pestelya and village of Suvorovske) have amalgamated (DESPRO, 2020).

The capacity of local authorities to develop partnerships (local authorities – public organizations – business) should aim at supporting local democracy and improving the lives of local communities. Namely, better governance, waste collection, school access, water treatment, climate security, public lighting, health, gender equality, economic development. In each project, the partners join forces

and work to identify problems and find the best solutions. Due to the proximity of local government to citizens and their needs, as well as knowledge of local strengths and weaknesses, the local and regional level is the best place to resolve problems.

4. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on local governments

The key tasks of local governments are to improve living conditions for citizens and provide better public services. Thus, decentralisation is understood here as the ability of the local government to resolve local problems and provide services (e.g., primary and secondary education, primary health care provision, infrastructure). The COVID-19 pandemic put the ability of local authorities to provide services to an ultimate test.

In 2020, local governments faced new challenges. Although each Eastern Partnership country had its own problems, the COVID-19 pandemic affected everyone. Most countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine) implemented strict quarantine regimes including border closings, restrictions on movement and the closing of retail and hospitality industries (Table 4). Such actions significantly impacted citizens' rights and freedoms.

Table 4. Government precautions against the COVID-19 spread

Country	First case of COVID-19 (WHO, 2020)	Cases (cumulative total, as of March 8 2021)	Deaths – (cumulative total, as of March 8 2021)	Population (millions) (World Bank, 2020)	Quarantine dates and measures
Armenia	March 1 2020	175016	3225	2,957,713	March 16 - Emergency measures included closing all educational institutions, border closings, cancelation of gatherings of over 20, and postponement of the 2020 constitutional referendum.
Azerbaijan	February 28 2020	236963	3247	10,023,318	March 12 - suspension of all educational institutions and other related activities; a ban on hookah smoking in all public catering facilities; border closings.
Belarus	February 28 2020	296441	2047	9,466,856	March 12 - restriction of all cultural, sports and scientific events with international participation; restriction of entry from countries where COVID cases are recorded.
Georgia	February 2 2020	272998	3591	3720382	March 2 - breaks in schools and kindergartens began,

					store closures; border closing; cancelled mass events.
The Republic of Moldova	March 7 2020	195602	4129	2657637	March 17 - state-wide state of emergency; complete cessation of the economic activity
Ukraine	March 3 2020	1406800	27128	44385155	March 11 - state-wide quarantine; closure of educational institutions, cancelled mass events of more than 200 people; border closing.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Belarus did not impose strict quarantine restrictions. Notwithstanding the fact that the country's President, Alexander Lukashenko, stated he did not see a big COVID-19 problem, Belarus did impose state border crossing restrictions to prevent the spread of the infectious disease (The Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, 2020).

The coronavirus exposed all problems faced by local communities; most visibly, level of development of medical services, in clinics and hospitals. Border closures completely paralyzed tourism leading to a reduction in revenues. The World Bank listed early childhood education and development as being the most-affected area by the pandemic (World Bank Group, 2020). The COVID-19 quarantines and the closing of pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools have increased the inequalities in access to education (Table 5). Local self-governments faced the problem of organizing distance learning processes in pre-school and school institutions. Transferring to distance learning has caused more children to lose access to education due to lack of a computer, no Internet access, or poor home conditions or disabilities (UNESCO, 2020). There is also a gender aspect to the quarantine. After the closure of educational institutions, working women became the most vulnerable social category. Many of them had to resign from their positions because there was no one to take care of their children at home. Those who were forced to work from home ended up spending more time doing housework and tending to their children.

Table 5. Number of pupils enrolled in preschool, elementary and secondary schools during COVID-19 quarantine (UNESCO, 2020)

Country	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Belarus	Georgia	the Republic of Moldova	Ukraine
Status as of March 31 2020	Closed due to COVID-19	Closed due to COVID-19	Fully open	Closed due to COVID-19	Closed due to COVID-19	Closed due to COVID-19
School type						
Pre-school pupils	49,214	203,011		77,922	132,459	1,116,970
Elementary school pupils	153,415	635,153		305,368	140,141	1,676,550
Secondary school pupils	234,983	945,226		280,425	226,281	2,376,848

COVID-19 forced people to work from home and exposed new infrastructure requirements local authorities had not paid sufficient attention to. Particularly, the development of the Internet and online access to services. According to the World Bank, alternative ways of providing education (including digital platforms) which have been scaled up in response to the crisis in developed and middle-income economies, are likely to remain hard to access in poor countries (World Bank Group, 2020). Technological developments will be a determining factor in the sustainability of the region. Thus, increasing future local government emergency preparedness requires the development of electronic solutions for local governments, the integration of new technologies, the protection of data privacy and network security.

Notably, citizen distrust of official COVID-19 spread data is massive and the reasons for it vary from country to country. For example, in Belarus, experts believe the government is deliberately manipulating data on the COVID-19 spread (Deutsche Welle, 2020). In Ukraine, experts believe that the official data on the COVID-19 spread are incorrect due to the small number of tests (International Congress on Infusion Therapy, 2020). In this situation of mistrust, local governments were in a conundrum: on the one hand, they needed to ensure compliance with restrictive quarantine measures, on the other, they needed to ensure the provision of quality services. Under conditions of mistrust in the central government, civil society and volunteers begin to play a key role in solving the problem.

Thus, COVID-19 brought problems for local self-government that did not exist before.

Organization of community residents' compliance with quarantine restrictions, which were announced by the central government:

- monitoring the wearing of a protective mask by community residents;
- closure of shopping centres, service industries, gyms hairdressing salons, etc.;
- preparation of schedules for visiting grocery stores to avoid the congestion of people in one place;
- explanation and information to avoid citizens' distrust of local self-government;
- stopping public transport and allowing travel only for citizens with special documents;
- ban on holding public events, including church attendance. During the period of the quarantine restrictions, the Christians celebrated Easter at home, so the ban on attending church was perceived especially painfully.

Provision of local government services during quarantine restrictions:

- Closure of preschools and primary schools. The organization of the distance learning process required training of teachers for new technologies;
- the provision of primary health care (including care for pregnant women) for all categories of patients (and not only COVID-19 patients) in the face of a shortage of doctors, medical beds, the re-profiling of clinics, deficit apparatus for artificial lung ventilation;
- burial of the dead from coronavirus required the development of special conditions and protocols for autopsy and burial in order to prevent the transmission of infection;

- informing about the situation in the local community (the COVID-spread, the possibility of E-services, etc.)

Organization of social assistance and support for vulnerable groups in the local community:

- providing assistance to groups with risk get COVID infected (elderly, etc.), for example, buying groceries, medicines, etc.;
- social assistance to people with disabilities, the poor, people with disabilities in the new conditions of limited social contacts;
- development of new E-services that will help people in quarantine restrictions;
- deferral of payments for utilities or rent.

Support for local businesses, which were forced to close during quarantine:

- training for transformation a business for remote work or E-commerce;
- reduction of tax payment, communal property rent or payments for utilities.

The COVID-19 challenges can only be overcome with the cooperation of local authorities, civil society and business. Those problems that could not be solved by the local authorities due to limited resources were solved by civil society or entrepreneurs.

It is important to note that the problem of the spread of COVID-19 is common for all EaP countries, therefore the recommendations for them are the same. As can be seen from practical situations, local self-governments and volunteers are doing a lot to overcome the COVID-19 consequences, but their actions are not always consistent, well-communicated and coordinated. To improve efficiency, the following is recommended:

Competence and responsibility of local government:

- creation of an inclusive community, where all members (including migrants, vulnerable groups, the low-income citizens, etc.) have equal access to information and social services provided by local government. This means that information and social services (including schools and medical care) should be provided in an available form and language (including the language of national minorities).
- develop new E-services and create digital inclusion. This means that it is necessary to avoid digital discrimination when community members (especially vulnerable groups) do not have access to digital services (for example, medical care, school services, etc.) due to the lack of a computer, Internet or relevant skills.
- collection of information and develop of community registers (gender, age, migration and other), namely COVID-19 progress, community members who need help, migrants and IDPs, vulnerable groups, etc:
- In health care services should be delivered more focus on the preventive health and better customization of Health and care services to the vulnerable groups (e.g. older people, people living with disabilities) organization of vaccination for people from community and vulnerable groups

Cooperation of local self-government and central authorities:

- expanding the powers of local authorities to COVID-19 quarantine restriction imposition or removal. The local authorities are more quickly informed about the COVID-19 cases detection and the loading of beds in hospitals. If the local self-government has the right to decide on its own on the introduction / cancellation of COVID-19 quarantine restrictions based on information about COVID-19 patients and the load of beds in hospitals, this will help solve problems faster and more flexibly. Also, communication with community will be more efficiently, which will reduce social discontent.
- providing support for local businesses that must be closed or go bankrupt due to COVID-19 quarantine. As it has been shown, local budgets in all EaP countries depend on transfers from the central budget, so decisions on financial assistance (direct payment, tax incentives or other financial payments) to businesses can be made only after coordination with the central budget.
- protection of medical workers. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, local authorities saw a shortage of medical staff. Development and implementation of mechanisms for insurance and protection of life and health of medical staff can solve this problem.

Partnership of local self-government and business:

- development of digital infrastructure and expansion of digital access for community members (including vulnerable groups, the poor, persons with disabilities, etc.);
- improvement of hospital infrastructure, including the purchase of medical equipment.

Partnership of local self-government and civil society:

- catering and grocery shopping for vulnerable groups in the community;
- support for women in organizing distance learning in schools or closing kindergartens;
- informing about COVID-19 protection, as well as social services in a form and language accessible to community members (inclusiveness):
- improving and increasing the availability of social services (medical, school and others) through the use of information technology and digitalization. Adaptation of the method of providing social services to the needs of vulnerable groups (elderly people, people with physical disabilities, etc.) Organisation of social service to improve mental health (e.g. normalization of subclinical form of depression among older people);
- advocacy for the protection of labour rights, especially for teachers, medical and social workers. The terms of the teachers' contracts did not provide for the distance work. Therefore, it is necessary to revise labour relations and contracts, taking into account the new COVID-19 reality.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The conclusions and recommendations presented here on the process of decentralisation and local self-government in the EaP countries, have been drawn from analysis of research documents, expert survey results and open-source resources as well as individual contributions.

Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic has become a challenge for all EaP countries. In this regard, the leadership potential of local authorities and their ability to partner with civil society were determined by decisions made in the areas of health, primary education, E-services. Simultaneously, the low financial potential of local budgets and the level of transfers from the central budget significantly limit the ability of local governments to implement initiatives.

The dependence of local budgets on transfers from the central budget, as well as imbalance in territorial development, restrain the ability of local authorities in EaP countries to provide necessary services. EU and EU member states' support to the EaP countries in strengthening the capacity of local budgets should be aimed at developing institutional capacity and balancing local community development. It is recommended to intensify inter-municipal cooperation efforts which will be the basis for a network for the sustainable development of local communities in EaP countries. It is also recommended to strengthen gender-balanced budgeting at the local level and improve access to primary education during the COVID-19 pandemic. All EaP countries have quality digital and/or e-government services, as well as access to digital information about local communities.

All EaP countries have problems related to strategic planning, transparency, accountability in budget spending decisions, and low levels of civil society's influence on decision-making. Thus, it is advisable that EU and EU member states focus on strengthening leadership development programs for local authorities and civil society within. In the EaP countries, trust levels toward CSOs and volunteers are higher than to government initiatives. Only in Georgia, the trust level towards CSOs is declining. The actions of CSOs and volunteers in Belarus and Ukraine have become decisive in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, their potential is declining, thus EU initiatives should aim at supporting and strengthening the financial capacity of CSOs.

Armenia

Armenia is showing progress in the development of E-services, access to digital information, and well-developed inter-municipal cooperation in tax data collection. At the same time, disparity in the regional development of communities is affecting their economic potential and capacity. Also, the high centralization of financial resources in the central budget makes local governments dependent on the central government rather than the local community. It is therefore recommended to **implement measures that will strengthen fiscal decentralisation and the equalization of territorial development**. Additionally, efforts should be made to develop cooperation between local authorities and local CSOs.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan demonstrates a high concentration of power in the President's administration and large gaps between the development of Baku and other regions. The advocacy activities of CSOs are limited although, on paper, they can participate in the discussion and authoritative decision-making processes. CSOs are mainly concentrated in Baku. This significantly limits the ability of regions to influence decision-making. It is recommended to **develop the capacity of local CSOs and pursue a policy to reduce inequalities in the development of local communities**. In

addition, it is necessary to create an institutional basis for decentralisation and development of inter-municipal cooperation.

Belarus

Belarus is the only EaP country which has not signed the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Local governments are highly centralized and dependent on the central government. Local decision-making is not transparent. Recognizing the high level of centralization tends to put the focus on the central government level rather than the local level. This holds particularly true for decisions and processes related to budgeting. Official data provoke mistrust and repression thus making CSOs' activities very risky. Despite being under great pressure, CSOs demonstrate strength and a high potential in the ability to counteract manipulation and cooperate via Internet tools and social networks. Notably, initiatives from CSOs and volunteers were decisive during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is recommended to **develop CSO competences to assess and influence local budgets. The European Charter of Local Self-Government should also be signed in order to create an institutional framework for the development of local communities.**

Georgia

Georgia demonstrates progress in the development of local self-government, building inter-municipal cooperation, the participation of CSOs in decision-making, and the availability of E-governance and digital services. However, public confidence in CSOs is declining. Therefore, to increase public confidence, it is recommended to **develop the communication and transparency of CSOs activities.** It is also recommended to **strengthen the economic potential of local communities through developing effective mechanisms for public and private partnerships.** At present, the potential of the business sector in diversifying municipal services and protecting public interests remains underutilized.

The Republic of Moldova

The mechanism for CSOs participation in local initiatives and decision-making continues to develop. However, local budgets are highly dependent on transfers from the central budget. Successful inter-municipal cooperation for the development of rural areas and solving other local problems (for example, water treatment) has been noted. It is recommended to **strengthen fiscal decentralisation and increase the effectiveness of the CSO's participation in local decision-making and develop effective mechanisms for public and private partnership.**

Ukraine

Ukraine's progress in decentralisation reform is demonstrated by increasing the financial capacity of local budgets, developing inter-municipal cooperation, and raising access to E-services and digital information on local communities. The main problem for the development of decentralisation is posed by the military-civil administrations in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Whereas this form of territorial administration is not defined in Ukraine's Constitution, the specificities related to the status of the post-conflict territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, now under Ukrainian governmental control, require special attention for the development of decentralisation mechanisms and tools. Important aspects including proximity to the combat zone, the competence of potential united communities, the real managerial capacity of future communities must be taken into account. Therefore, the development of specific models of local self-government is required. The **further advancement of decentralisation reform requires Constitutional amendment aimed at**

strengthening the capacity of district and oblast self-government bodies and crystalizing executive body powers on the sub-regional and regional levels.

Glossary

Decentralisation is a complex and multifaceted concept of the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to intermediate and local governments or quasi-independent government organizations and/or the private sector (The World Bank Group, 2001).

Administrative decentralisation seeks to redistribute authority, responsibility, and financial resources for providing public services among different levels of government. It is the transfer of responsibility for the planning, financing, and management of certain public functions from the central government and its agencies to field units of government agencies, subordinate units or levels of government, semi-autonomous public authorities or corporations, or area-wide, regional or functional authorities.

Political decentralisation aims to give citizens or their elected representatives more power in public decision-making.

Fiscal decentralisation is associated with the authority of the decentralized units to make expenditure decisions with funds either raised locally (e.g. user charges, co-financing with users, property taxes, borrowing, etc.) or transferred from the central government. In many developing countries, local governments or administrative units possess the legal authority to impose taxes, but often the tax base is not sufficient to undertake local investments, so that they rely heavily on government transfers.

Local self-government denotes the right and the ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population (Council of Europe, 1985).

The main powers and responsibilities of local authorities are a set of rights and obligations, that are fixed at the legislative level and necessary to resolve issues on the territory of the municipality.

Powers of local self-government:

- own authority to address issues of local importance
- powers delegated by the central government to be implemented at the local government level.

Eastern Partnership countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a joint initiative of the EU, its Member States, and [Armenia](#), [Azerbaijan](#), [Belarus](#), [Georgia](#), the [Republic of Moldova](#) and [Ukraine](#). Launched in 2009, the EaP is a strategic and ambitious partnership based on common values and rules, mutual interests and commitments, as well as shared ownership and responsibility. The Eastern Partnership contributes to the overall goal of increasing the stability, prosperity, and resilience of the EU's neighbours as set out in the [Global Strategy for the foreign and security policy of the EU](#) and the 2015 European Neighbourhood Policy Review. It supports the delivery of many global policy objectives, including the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development goals (European Commission, 2015; European Union, 2016).

Methodological note

Developed in collaboration with Kiryl Kascian, External Expert of the EaP CSF Secretariat, the research methodology is two-fold – desk-research and the expert survey. The EaP countries have different political systems and political regimes, cultural and reform progress. The desk research and expert survey provide a reliable and objective assessment of the existing facts about the implementation of the European Principles of Decentralisation in EaP countries.

The purpose of the desk research was to analyse documents, statistical data and Internet resources on the implementation of the European Principles of Decentralisation in EaP countries. The expert survey was implemented online. Thus, the expert online survey clarified the desk research results to obtain information that is only available in the native language of each individual EaP country, as well as to support the results and conclusions.

The online expert survey was conducted between 8 and 25 December 2020. An online questionnaire was developed. The following three main conditions were decisive in selecting the online questionnaire format for the expert evaluations:

- the need for a remote survey of a number of experts who are in different countries;
- the need for experts to choose a convenient time and date during the survey period to complete the questionnaire (approximate 30-minute duration), and;
- previous experience, support from the EaP CSF Secretariat, and open access of organizers and experts to Internet services (Google forms, direct E-mails, social networks, etc.), contributed to conducting the survey within the specified period allotted to this research project.

The questionnaires were distributed throughout the networks of the EaP CSF, Women's Major Group in the UNECE Region, the League of Professional Women NGO and direct E-mailing (personal contacts).

Expert survey design

The expert survey is aimed at identifying and evaluating issues related to the implementation of Deliverable 11 of the EaP 20 Deliverables for 2020. The survey's specific task is to identify the current situations and issues in the following areas:

- Progress in implementing the European Principles of Decentralisation in the context of public administration reform (Support for the implementation of public administration reform).
- Cooperation in the implementation of local initiatives (i.e., local authorities, public organizations and business).
- Local initiatives to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey contained a set of structured, open-ended and closed-ended questions in the form of a questionnaire to be filled out, online, by the expert. The selection of the online survey format, rather than the expert interview format, was a more appropriate way of reaching out to respondents; it is more time-cost effective than the traditional way of gathering information through one-on-one interactions. During the survey, the data was collected and stored in Google Forms and then analysed. The expert survey questionnaire was developed by Nina Chala, Project Consultant, Kiryl Kascian, External Expert EaP CSF Secretariat, and Oleksandra Drabyk, Consultant.

The Google questionnaire was made available in Ukrainian, Russian and English in both the [online survey](#) as well as in Annex 1.¹ Information about the expert survey was also disseminated through the network of the EaP CSF, Women's Major Group in the UNECE Region, League of Professional Women NGO and via direct E-mailing (personal contact). Twenty-two completed questionnaires were received (Annex 2).

Questionnaire design

The questionnaire consists of 4 sections. Section 1 contains 9 questions aimed at determining the expert's profile and competence. Sections 2 through 4 contain questions which address the issues from various angles. It is aimed at assessing the progress in implementing the European Principles of Decentralisation in the context of public administration reform in the EaP countries, in relation to the context of Deliverable 11. It consists of closed-ended questions that have the same alternative answers. Therefore, these questions in the questionnaire were summarized in a table. Part 3 aims to assess the cooperation between local authorities, public organizations (NGOs), and businesses. It consists of closed-ended questions that have the same answer options. Therefore, the questions in the questionnaire were summarized in a table. There are also closed questions to determine the sustainability of this work. Information on local initiatives to address the effects of COVID-19 is provided in closed questions, in section 4.

Selection of experts

The process of forming a sample of experts for online surveys is crucial to the reliability and validity of its results. Thus, in analysing multidimensional matters such as decentralisation and local self-government in the EaP countries, it was important to ensure experts from all EaP countries were represented.

According to the selected sociological research methodology, the sample for an expert survey is from 10 (lower limit) to 100 (upper limit) (Novosad V., Seliverstov R., and Artym I., 2009; Panina, N., 2007; Gylin, B., V. Paniotto, and S. Krymsky, 1990; Panioto V., and N. Kharchenko, 2017). In the context of this expert survey, where representation of experts from the Eastern Partnership countries is provided, it was desirable to sample a set of about 10-20 expert respondents meeting the competence level criteria. The same criterion was applied to expert interviews. Twenty-two respondents completed the questionnaires thereby providing scientific strength to the virtual survey of experts.

Expert profile

Experts from all six EaP countries partook in the survey. Most of the surveyed experts have over 3 years of work experience in decentralisation, half of them have over 5 years of experience (Fig. 9). The gender balance of the interviewed experts was ensured. The representation of experts in professional activities (e.g., practical activities, implementation of reforms, analytical research), is balanced (Fig. 10).

¹ The Survey is available online at: <https://forms.gle/4mBGwYUKg50uJ49w9>

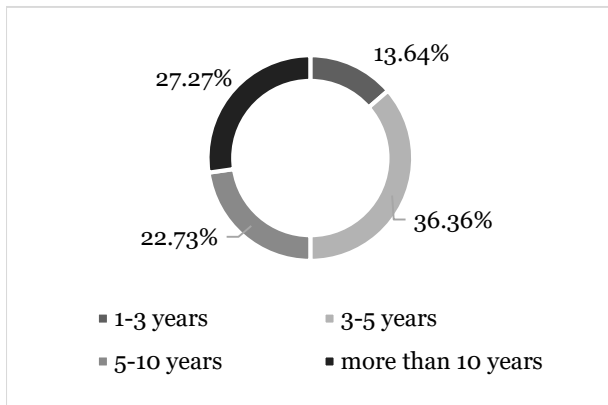


Figure 9. Experience of surveyed experts in the field of decentralisation

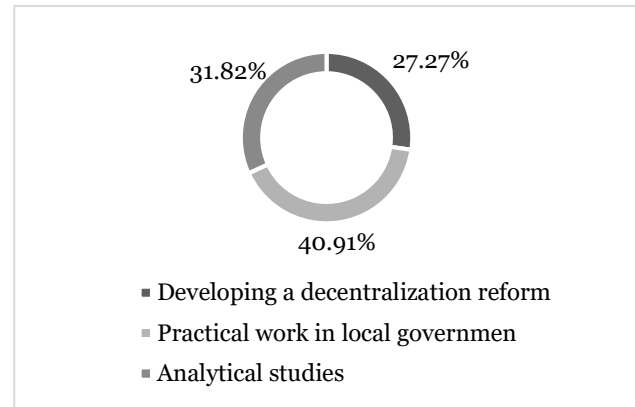


Figure 10. Current professional activities of surveyed experts

The questionnaire required information necessary to identify experts i.e. E-mail, work place. During this period, political conflict and arrests were ongoing in Belarus. The survey period was also marked by military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Thus, some experts assessed the risks of providing personal data as too high and thereby refused to participate in the survey, but they did provide information off the record. The survey of 22 experts allowed us to reach the research goal.

During the desk research phase, the results of qualitative research, including official information from international organizations (i.e., the EaP CSF analytical paper, the World Health Organization, the World Bank), public authorities, scientific and analytical sources, and other Internet sources.

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ANNEX 1.

Expert Survey Questionnaire

Decentralisation and Local Self-government in Eastern Partnership Countries

Dear Expert,

We invite you to take part in this survey of experts, the purpose of which is to assess the progress of decentralisation and the development of local self-government in Eastern Partnership countries.

Part 1. General information about an Expert

1. Your Name and Surname _____

2. E-mail: _____

3. Blog, page in the social network _____

4. The name of the organization you represent _____

5. How long have you been dealing with issues of decentralisation and local self-government:

1-3 years 3-5 years

5-10 years

more than 10 years

6. Your current professional activities in the field of local government are mainly related to:

a) Analytical studies

b) Practical work in local government

c) Developing a decentralisation reform

7. If you have answered a) in the previous question, please give provide links to your work

8. The country for which you have expertise in the field of decentralisation:

Azerbaijan

Belarus

Armenia

Georgia

Moldova

Ukraine

Other country (please, specify): _____

9. The country where you currently live/work mainly:

Azerbaijan

Belarus

Armenia

Georgia

Moldova

Ukraine

Other country (please, specify): _____

Part 2. Progress in the implementation of the European Principles of Decentralisation in the context of public administration reform in the EaP countries addressing the context of Deliverable 11 (Support the implementation of public administration reform).

Rate on a 5-point scale (0 – very poor, 5 - excellent) implementation of the European principles of decentralisation in the country on which you act as an expert

	0	1	2	3	4	5
Level of development of strategic planning						
Transparency of decision-making by local government						
Transparency and accountability in the formation and use of local financial resources						
Perception and tolerance of corruption in local government						
Implementation of E-Governance						
The level of local government digitalization						
Availability of digital information about your community						
Assess the level of local government service provision for community members						
Rate the level of local government services provided for the business						
Assess the level of participation of public organizations in local government						
Assess the level of civil society participation in local government						
Assess Gender Balance in Local Government Representation						
Assess Ethnic Balance in Local Government Representation						

How did the introduction of E-Governance affect the quality of local government?

Part 3. Cooperation in the implementation of local initiatives: local authorities - public organizations - business

Rate on a 5-point scale (0 – very poor, 5 - excellent) the level of cooperation between local authorities - public organizations and business.

	0	1	2	3	4	5
Projects of inter-municipal cooperation are developing actively						
Local business is actively involved in the implementation of the local government's social initiatives						
When implementing business projects, there are always public consultations						
Civil society initiatives aimed at the socio-economic development of the territory are always supported by local authorities						
Socio-economic projects are actively implemented in partnership between local authorities and business						
Civil society initiatives do not conflict with business projects						
Cooperation between local authorities, business, and public initiatives is constantly evolving						
Cooperation between local authorities, business, and public initiatives is noticeable only on the eve of local elections						
You can register a new business quickly and easily						
You can quickly and easily close your business						
A building permit can be obtained quickly and easily						
Obtaining permission to connect to power infrastructure is quick and easy						

1. The most considerable cooperation between local government and business is:

- in the sphere of infrastructure development
- in the field of housing
- in the sphere industrial facility construction
- in the field of social infrastructure development
- in the sphere of social services provision
- in the communal sphere

- in other (specify)

2. Cooperation between civil society and local is most visible:

- when implementing environmental projects
- when implementing social projects
- when implementing youth projects
- other (specify what exactly).

Part 4. Local initiatives to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

1. Was quarantine introduced in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic:

- a) A complete quarantine was introduced with a complete cessation of the service sector and business
- b) A complete quarantine was introduced with the termination of the work of all enterprises and public transport
- c) A partial quarantine was introduced with the restriction of holding mass events
- d) No restrictions were imposed on the operation of businesses and public transport

2. If a full or partial quarantine was introduced, what kind of support did businesses receive:

- a) None
- b) Received support from local government in the form of additional tax holidays
- c) Received support at the state level
- d) Received support from the local government in the form of priority procurement of services from local businesses
- e) Other (specify what exactly)
- f) Difficult to answer

3. Has a local COVID-19 pandemic relief fund been established?

- a) Yes
- b) No

4. Have the local government representatives applied for financial support?

- a) Yes, applied at the state level
- b) Yes, applied to the European Funds

- c) No, they did not apply.
- d) Difficult to answer.

Would you be interested in participating in a semi-structured interview for the purposes of this research?

Yes

No

I give the right to process my personal information for the purposes of this research and its subsequent publication

Yes

No

Thank you for your time and participation in the study!

ANNEX 2

List of Expert Respondents

No.	Name and Surname	Country of expertise	Name of organization
1	Alexandru Coica	Belarus Armenia Moldova Ukraine	ALDA - European Association for Local Democracy
2	Lilia Carasciuc	Moldova	TI-Moldova
3	Abraham Artashesyan	Armenia	Communities Finance Officers Association
4	Visnja Bacanovic	Ukraine Serbia	Gender Knowledge Hub, Women's Platform for Development of Serbia
5	Oleksii Lyska	Ukraine	Regional Union
6	Oleksandra Drabyk	Ukraine	IE "DRABYK O.O."; "Entrepreneurship Development Assistance Center", NGO
7	Inna Khovrak	Ukraine	KrNU
8	Andrew Urushadze	Georgia	Reformatics
9	Gelashvili Mery	Georgia	Fund of Women Entrepreneurs
10	Zaur Rasulzade	Azerbaijan	Korrespondent.az
11	Nuriyev Alimammad	Azerbaijan	"Constitution" Researches Foundation
12	Liliana Palihovici	Moldova	"Institutum Virtutes Civilis" Public Association
13	Nadia Proz	Ukraine	Kamianka-Buzka District Regional Development Agency
14	Iryna Kuropas	Ukraine	Yavoriv Region Local Economic Development Agency
15	Andrian Fitio	Ukraine	NGO "Analytical Center" Expert Group "
16	Oxana Evsyukova	Ukraine Poland	National Academy for Public Administration under the President of Ukraine

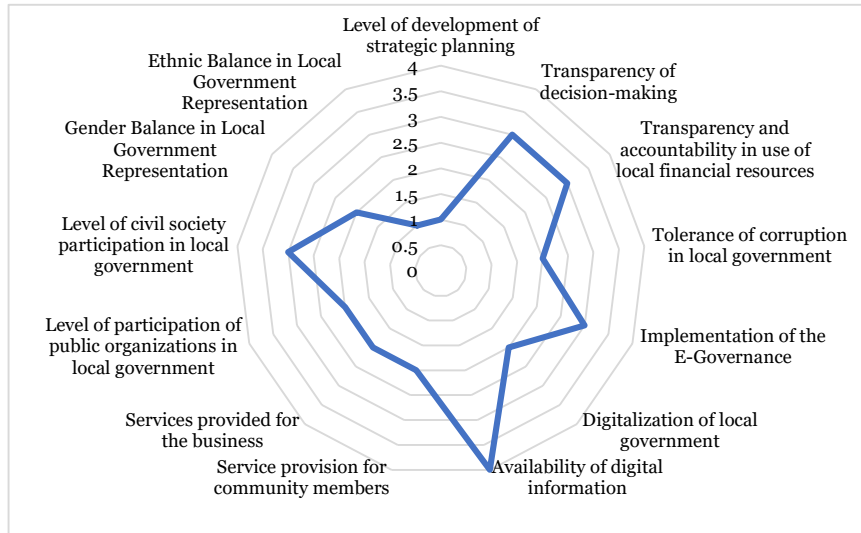
17	Yaryna Tanchak	Ukraine	NGO "Academy of Socio-Economic Initiatives"
18	Vitaliy Tolubiak	Ukraine	Western Ukrainian National University
19	Zinoviy Dazko	Ukraine	Entrepreneurship Development Center
20	Grigiriy Monastyrskiy	Ukraine Poland	Western Ukrainian National University
21	Sergiy Loboyko	Ukraine	Center for Innovations Development
22	Krystyna Vlodek	Ukraine Poland	Foundation Institute for Eastern European Studies

ANNEX 3

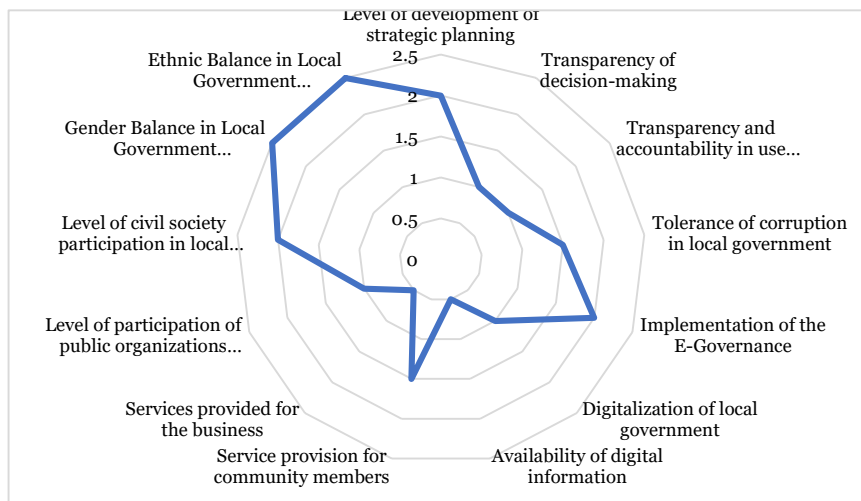
The profile of progress in implementing Deliverable 11 for the EaP countries

The experts rated the implementation of the European Principles of Decentralisation (Deliverable 11) on a 5-point scale (0 - very poor, 5 - excellent).

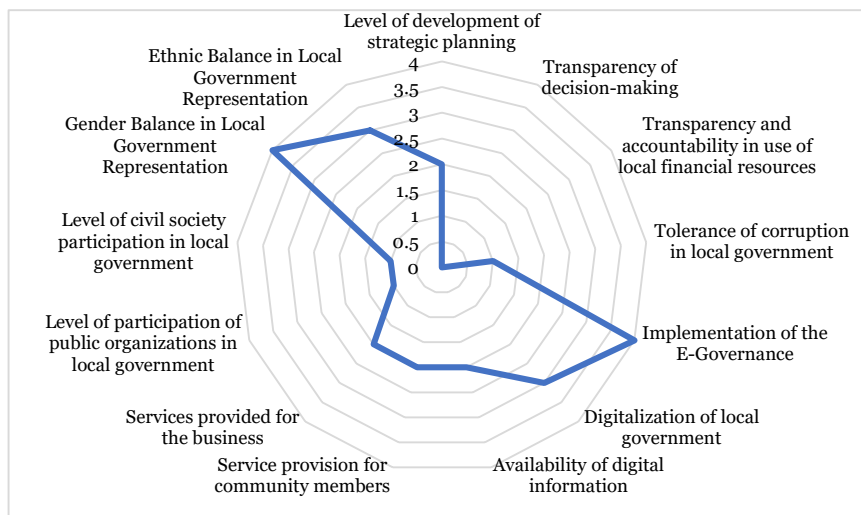
Armenia



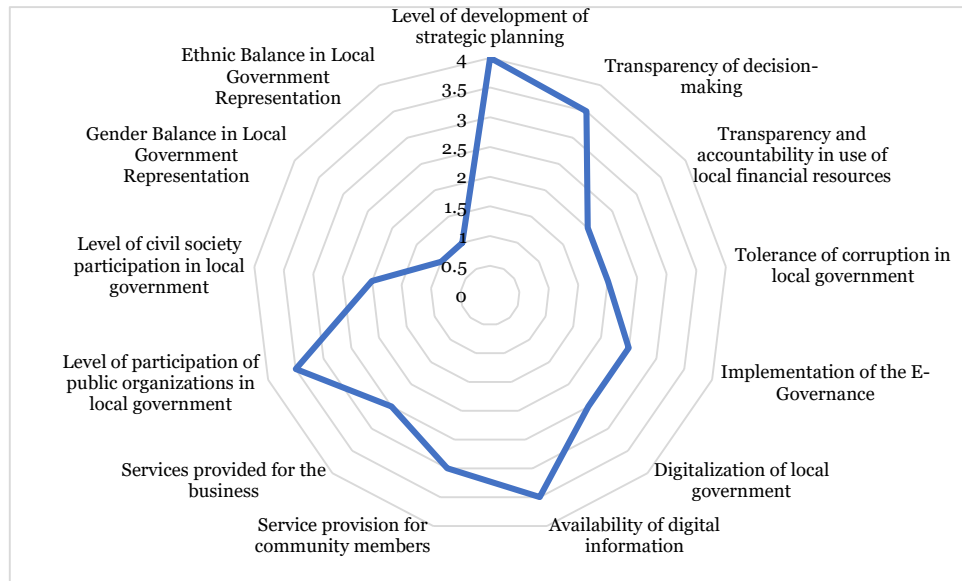
Azerbaijan



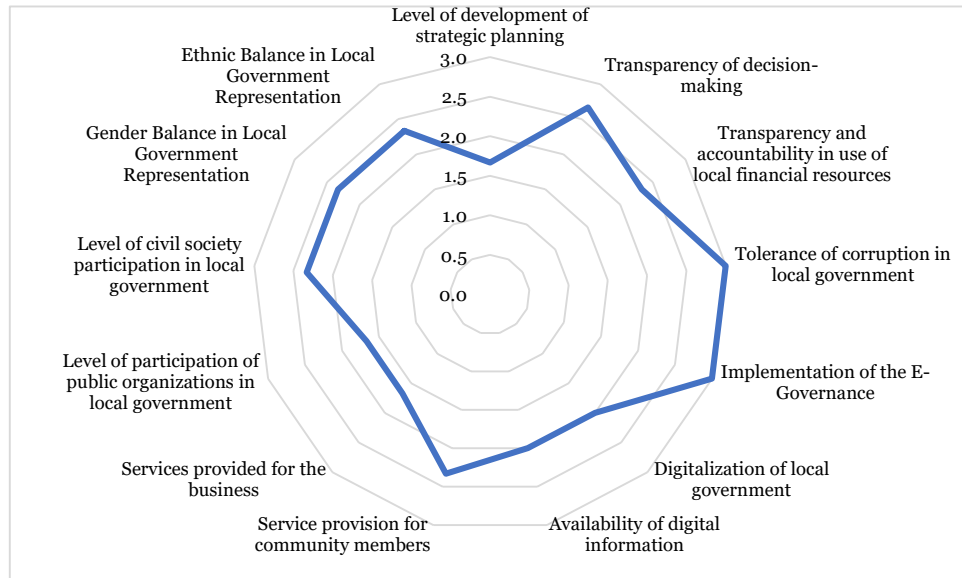
Belarus



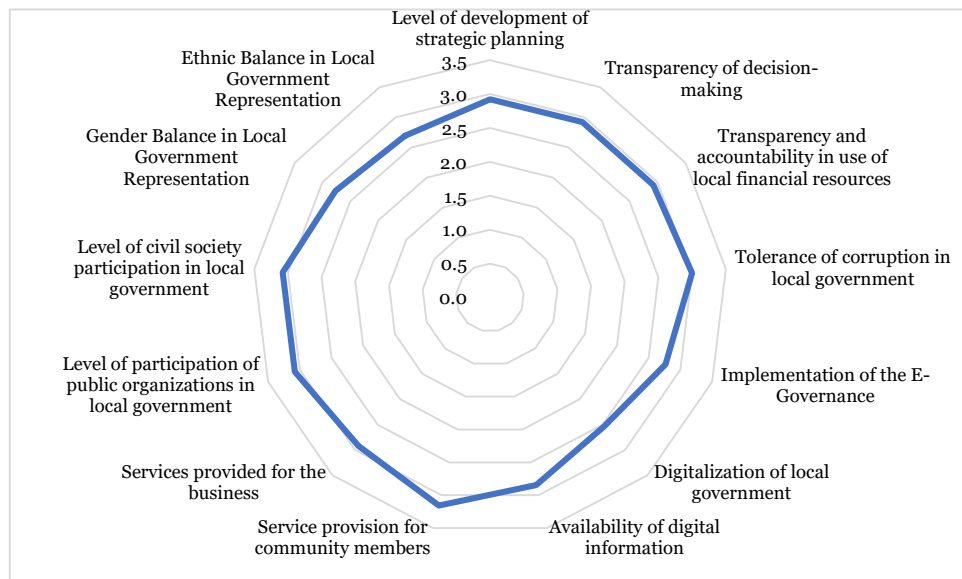
Georgia



The Republic of Moldova



Ukraine

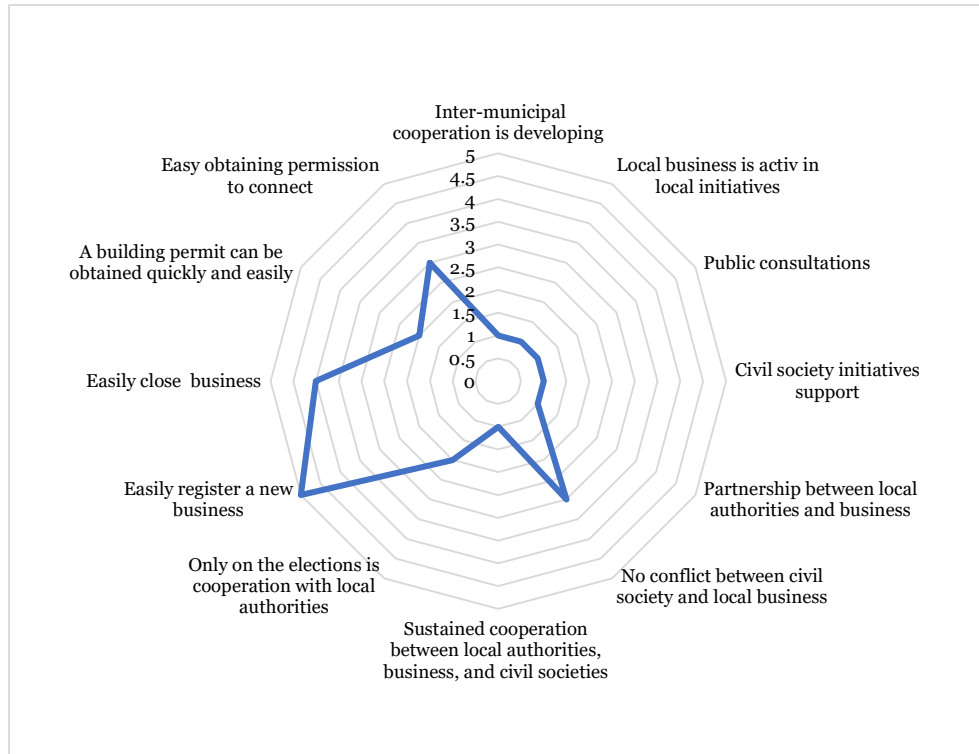


ANNEX 4

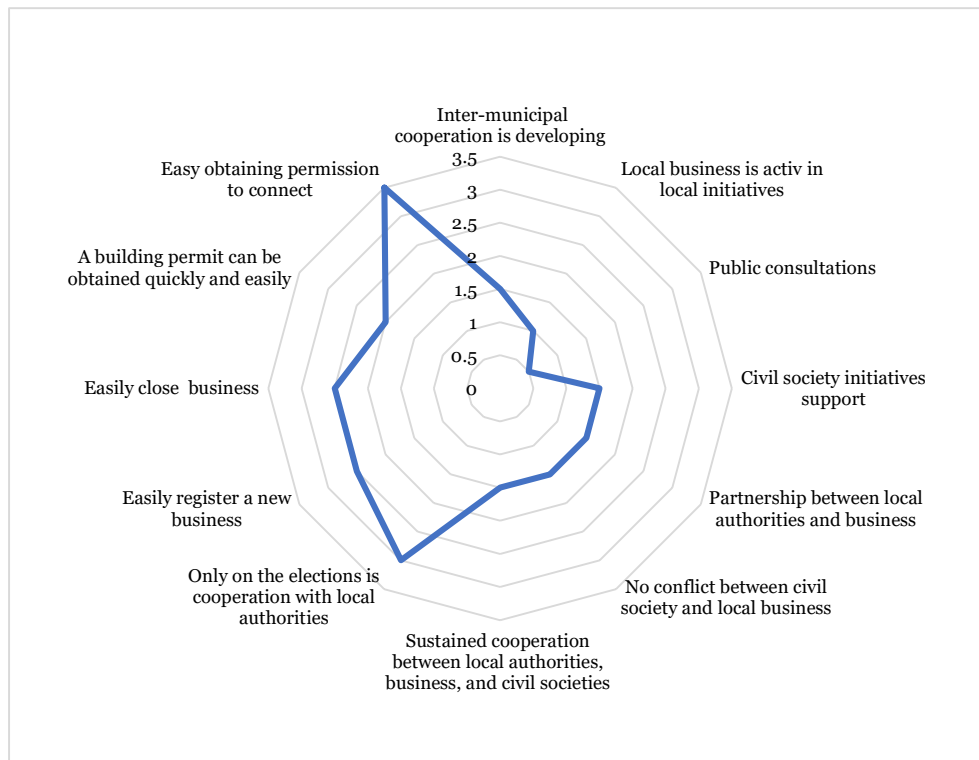
Profile of cooperation in the implementation of local initiatives: local authorities – public organizations – business

The experts rated on a 5-point scale (0 - very poor, 5 - excellent) *cooperation in the implementation of local initiatives: local authorities – public organizations – business*.

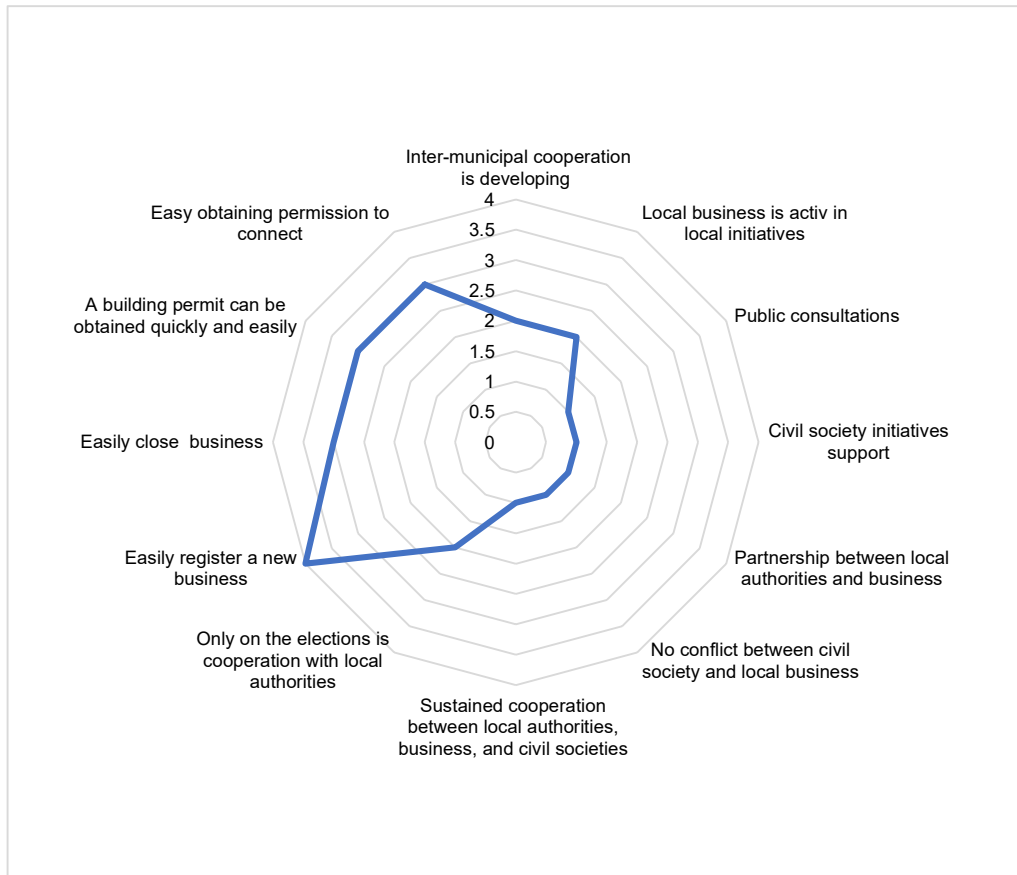
Armenia



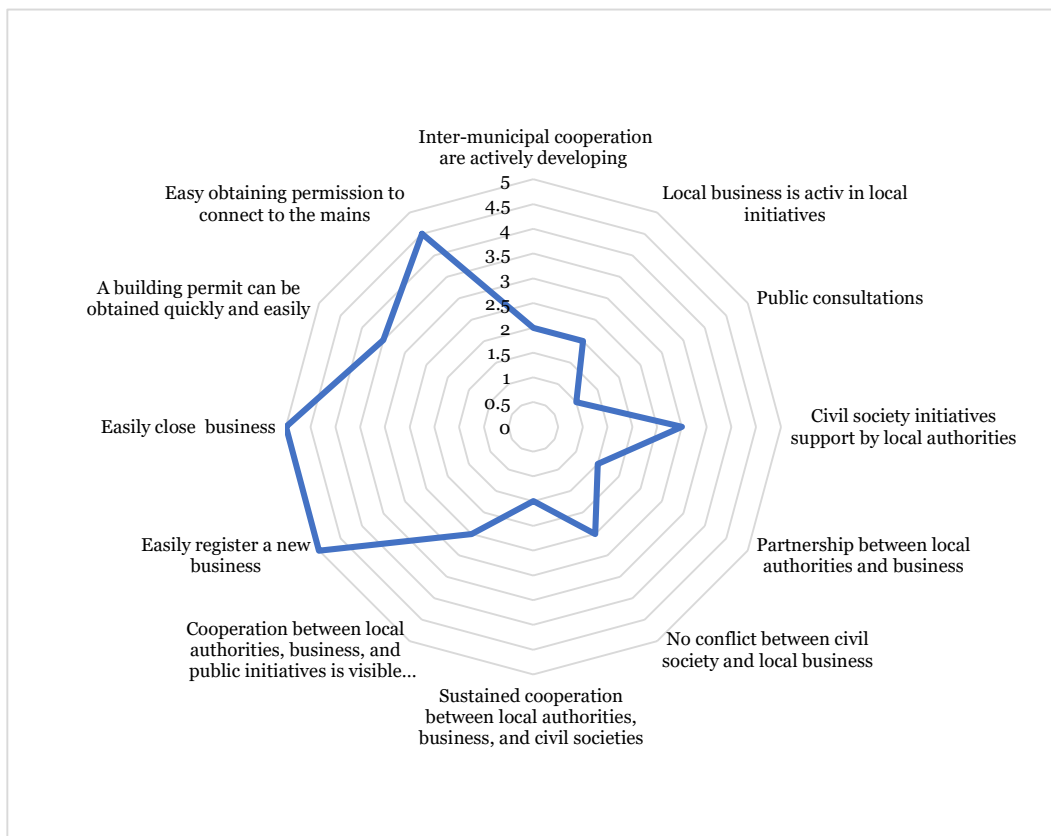
Azerbaijan



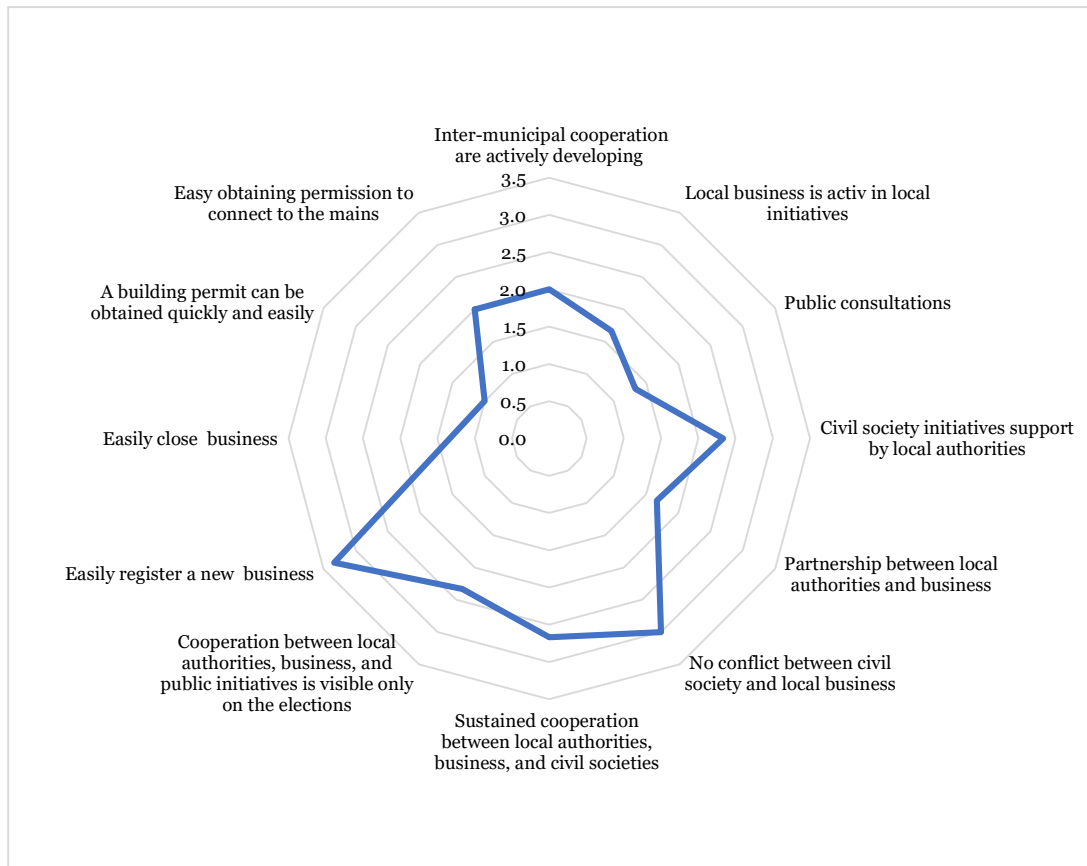
Belarus



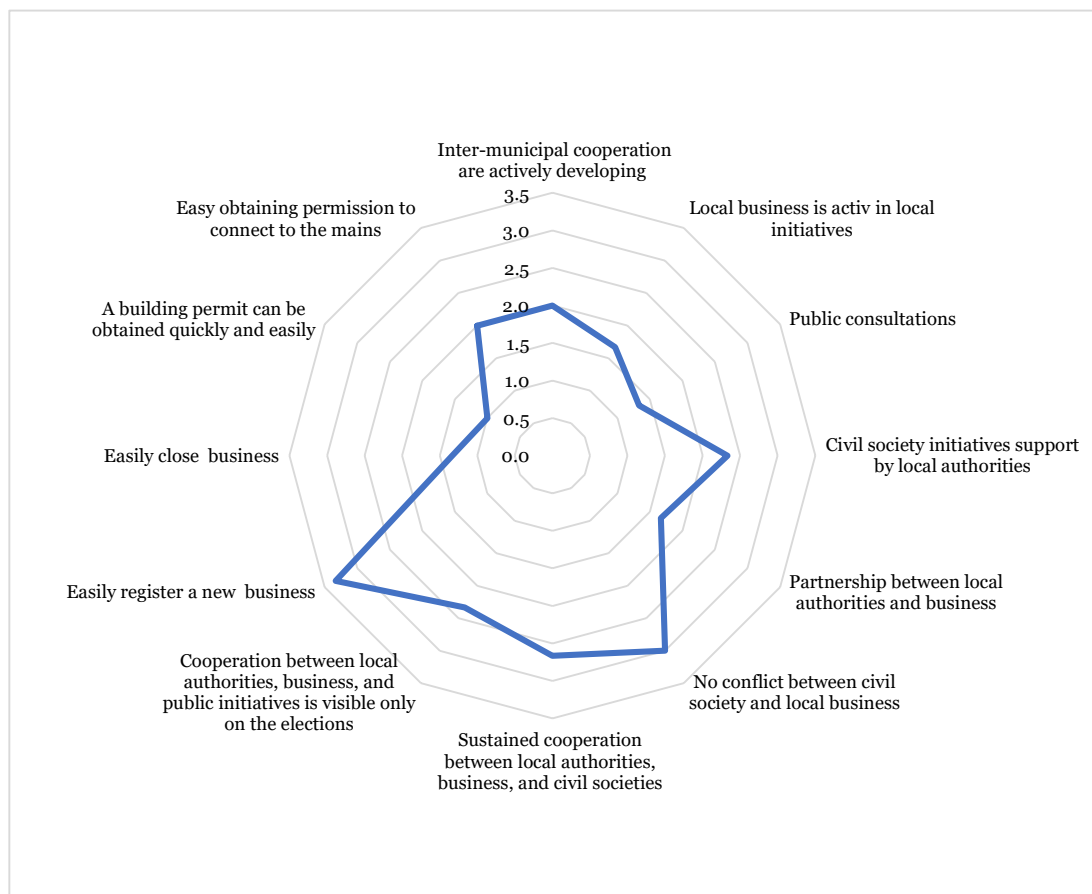
Georgia



The Republic of Moldova



Ukraine



ANNEX 5

Figures:

- Figure 1 Strategic planning and transparency by decision making local self-government at the EaP countries
- Figure 2 Level of digitalization of local self-government
- Figure 3 Assessment of the level of local government services
- Figure 4 Level of civil society participation in local self-government
- Figure 5 Gender Balance in local self-government representation
- Figure 6 Level of inter-municipal cooperation
- Figure 7 Level involved business in the implementation of social initiatives of local government
- Figure 8 Communication and dialog of business, local government, and civil society through the implementation of local projects
- Figure 9 Experience of surveyed experts in the field of decentralisation
- Figure 10 Current professional activities of surveyed experts
- Annex 3 The profile of progress in implementing Deliverable 11 for the EaP countries
- Annex 4 Profile of cooperation in the implementation of local initiatives: local authorities – public organizations – business

Tables:

- Table 1 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Ranking
- Table 2 Local Democracy Governance Ranking
- Table 3 E-Government Development Index & E-participation Index
- Table 4 Government precautions against the COVID-19 spread
- Table 5 Number of pupils enrolled in preschool, elementary and secondary schools during COVID quarantine

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About EaP CSF

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) is a unique multi-layered regional civil society platform aimed at promoting European integration, facilitating reforms and democratic transformations in the six Eastern Partnership countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Serving as the civil society and people-to-people dimension of the Eastern Partnership, the EaP CSF strives to strengthen civil society in the region, boost pluralism in public discourse and policy making by promoting participatory democracy and fundamental freedoms. For more information, please visit the EaP CSF website at www.eap-csf.eu.

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