



Eastern Europe Sub-Regional CSO-UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding Chişinău, 9 – 10 September 2025

MEETING REPORT

Executive Summary

In response to civil society requests, CMI-Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation and UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office co-organized an **Eastern Europe Sub-Regional CSO-UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding** in Chisinau on 9 and 10 September 2025.

The Dialogue brought together UN and civil society actors from across the region to discuss ways to further strengthen the role of CSOs in building peace more effectively through a whole-of-system approach. **At the forefront of the current global shifts and changes**, discussion revealed how UN peacebuilding could learn from Eastern Europe about how to adapt to the current context.

Participants highlighted regional peacebuilding opportunities and challenges, noting an overall transformation of the field in which **civil society plays a central role, particularly in translating global frameworks into local strategies**. Including civil society from the outset of policymaking and programming, and meaningfully engaging with youth and women, were identified as essential for durable, context-specific impact.

Interconnected crises were discussed as opportunities to drive integrated action. Cross-border cooperation mechanisms, standing CSO–UN committees, and regional expert networks to ensure rapid, coordinated responses and facilitate knowledge-sharing across countries were highlighted. The UN was encouraged to strengthen its role as a connector of formal and informal actors, and of national, local and regional processes, supporting CSO capacity-building, fostering trust with governments, and establishing accountability mechanisms.

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agendas were recognized as **key pillars for cross-sectoral peacebuilding**, highlighting the need for these agendas to be implemented with flexibility to have real impact. The importance of working with local champions and civic education for enhanced impact was stressed.

Participants reflected on the importance of civil society innovations and the strong **linkages between human rights and peacebuilding in the region**, particularly as civic space shrinks and democracy comes increasingly under threat. The need for long-term, flexible, and locally led funding models was also underlined.

The insights collected during this Sub-Regional Dialogue will directly **feed into the global CSO–UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding** on the same theme, taking place in Geneva on 10 - 11 December 2025.



I. Introduction

Established in 2023 by the United Nations (DPPA/PBSO), the **CSO-UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding** is an initiative that seeks to provide more systematic entry points for civil society to engage with the UN and Member States on peacebuilding issues¹.

Two annual global Dialogues have been convened to date at the UN Headquarters in New York (2023 and 2024), bringing together civil society representatives from around the world. Throughout the Dialogues, participants have consistently emphasized the importance of convening **Regional Dialogues feeding into the global discussions**, to help enhance localization and establish systematic feedback loops.

In response to requests from civil society organizations in the region, CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation and UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office co-organized the first Eastern Europe Sub-Regional CSO-UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding in Chisinau on 9 and 10 September 2025. Hosted at the UN Women Moldova Country Office, the event brought together a small group of civil society peacebuilding actors from **Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, as well as UN actors** from across the system.

In line with the theme of the 2025 CSO-UN global dialogue on peacebuilding, participants discussed ways to further strengthen the strategic and operational partnership between the UN and civil society across the peacebuilding spectrum, exploring **the role of CSOs in enhancing the effectiveness of the UN system and in operationalising a whole-of-system approach** at global, regional and local levels.

II. Eastern Europe civil society and UN Peacebuilding

‘What we are seeing starts in our region’. Participants stressed how Eastern Europe is at the centre of a world where ‘geopolitics is back’ and peace is in crisis.

Growing authoritarian tendencies, shrinking civic space, external interference and the emergence of new forms of warfare are placing immense pressure on peacebuilding. However, none of these challenges are new to Eastern Europe, which is thus **well placed to share best practices and lessons learned** about how to adapt to these new realities.

Countries in Eastern Europe **share a broad range of peacebuilding challenges** that surfaced and have evolved since the fall of the Soviet Union. This includes a lack of trust between people, in institutions and government structures, ethnic divisions, border disputes, weakening social cohesion, human rights deficits, democratic backsliding, hybrid threats and high levels of mis- and disinformation.

¹ For more information on the CSO UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding, kindly access [this link](#).



The **centrality of free speech** was brought to the fore, notably in the context of a region where civil society is often increasingly forced to focus on defending fundamental human rights. Finding mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of an active civil society is a necessity when governments systematically undermine it. In a region with a rich history of active civil society, now facing increasing strain, local investment is a necessity.

While the role of peacebuilding CSOs in open or frozen conflicts is largely overlooked by international actors, Eastern Europe can provide multiple lessons and best practices of how **civil society can play a key role in strengthening social cohesion**. The potential role of regional organizations is particularly prominent here, with the EU accession process playing a crucial, and sometimes overlooked, role.

Civil society organizations in the region are **having to adapt, confronting difficult questions about what actions remain effective, and what must change**. Some positive results have been identified in the region in addressing long-standing cross-border tensions through dialogue, building relations and shared understandings.

The **region is witnessing a peacebuilding transformation** from a predominantly government-led activity to one where civil society plays a central role. Yet, CSOs are not receiving adequate recognition and should not feel forced to take on government roles. ‘We need to jointly adapt to new realities and build shared understandings’.

As civic space continues to shrink, questions were raised about what the UN is doing to engage with CSOs, what role CSOs play within the UN system and what **accountability mechanisms there are for UN–CSO cooperation**. It was also noted that while the UN cannot halt diplomacy, it must strive to adapt through flexible processes.

Experience from the first Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) supported project in the region² shows how insufficient engagement with civil society organizations at the outset can undermine the project’s outcomes. To generate truly lasting impact, civil society must be involved from the planning stage.

III. The role of Civil Society in Aligning Global Frameworks and Agendas for Local Impact

Global policy frameworks provide legitimacy, benchmarks and financial mechanisms, and help frame relations between communities, nations, regions and people. Their real impact, however, relies on how well they are **integrated, implemented and contextualized**.

² The first PBF project in the region took place in Moldova, titled *Building sustainable peace and inclusive peace, strengthening trust and social cohesion in Moldova*.



While it is key to translate global agendas into local contexts, it is equally crucial for **global frameworks to reflect local and regional priorities**, instead of local contexts being made to fit global strategies. Civil society plays a central role in bridging global frameworks and commitments with real needs, connecting leaders with their communities across ethnic and political divides.

Through active **regional and national cross-border platforms and coalitions** that mobilize and engage communities – including marginalized groups, conflict-affected and vulnerable populations and minorities – civil society can help translate the language of global frameworks into local realities (and vice versa). If provided with adequate space and resources, civil society can play key roles in operationalizing global frameworks and agendas, notably as navigators of complexities, monitors of implementation, guardians of accountability, trust and confidence builders, agents of innovation and pilots of new solutions that can then be scaled if successful.

While WPS and YPS National Action Plans (NAPs) can serve as important tools for operationalization, they often remain policy documents, rather than strategic and practical tools. To avoid this, NAPs should be both **designed and implemented collaboratively between CSOs and government entities**, with realistic targets, effective accountability, progress monitoring, and sufficient resources.

Civil society participants stressed the crucial role that civil society plays in ensuring that peacebuilding strategies are contextualized and grounded in **solid, evidence-based gender responsive conflict analysis and context-specific** nationally and locally driven processes. Civil society should be treated as genuine partners in a two-way process, where their role is not just to implement.

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agendas are an example of **global frameworks that, if properly locally adapted, can accelerate progress** on human rights and peacebuilding, with each agenda able to draw valuable lessons from the other.

IV. Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) as pillars of cross-sectoral peacebuilding

Participants emphasized that gender equality and youth empowerment should not be treated as separate tracks, but fully **mainstreamed across all peacebuilding efforts**, actively addressing and challenging harmful stereotypes.

Many communities remain unaware of the global agendas including YPS and WPS, and what they involve. Yet they play central roles in their advancement. The UN could **do more to find and support local WPS and YPS champions**. To amplify impact, it is key to target



individuals and organizations active on social media and public platforms, as well as think-tanks to help raise awareness and inform policy-making and implementation.

The **YPS and WPS agendas are increasingly politicized** and under-resourced in the region, as security and stabilization are prioritised over inclusion. The agendas risk being co-opted for political interests, overlooking the role of women and youth in peacebuilding, rather than serving as platforms for genuine dialogue. Finding ways to promote and safeguard YPS and WPS, showing how investing in local women and youth networks yields long-term impact, is critical to maintaining the agendas' credibility.

The goal is not to work for, but with youth and women, ensuring their **genuine inclusion throughout the process**, rather than consulting them only at the end. This requires building trust and fostering long-term participation and safe engagement opportunities, rather than limiting inclusion to short-term projects that can create feelings of exclusion or frustration. Governments and the UN should support capacity-building to help ensure meaningful inclusion in decision-making, rather than treating engagement as tokenistic.

Strengthening institutional connections between women, youth and formal structures can make participation more sustainable and impactful. This can be done by ensuring accessible entry points, and insisting on formal consultations across formal UN structures such as the Security Council, the Peacebuilding Commission, the General Assembly, and the Human Rights Council. These groups bring essential local expertise and must be treated as equal partners.

Examples from the region demonstrate how **dialogue platforms have effectively advanced implementation**, even without purposely doing so or using the global terminology. The opening of a women's center and the setting up of women's dialogue groups speaking about their priorities, in their language with their terms, have resulted in women assuming increasingly influential roles in local governance. Learning from these initiatives is crucial for broader implementation. Global agendas should be approached flexibly, open to supporting also projects that do not fit neatly into existing resolutions.

Moreover, **education and civic dialogue** are essential to help youth contextualize peacebuilding, especially in societies suffering from frozen conflicts, where the younger generation has not experienced open conflict and may lack an understanding of the roots and realities of the conflict.

V. Human Rights

Due to persisting impunities across borders, the **interlinkage between human rights and peacebuilding** has become particularly important in this region over the last years.



Human rights mechanisms provide a platform for civil society to voice needs and raise concerns that extend into peacebuilding. Civic space should be recognized as a security asset, for which multilateralism is a force multiplier.

Participants raised questions about the extent to which **civil society can leverage human rights mechanisms for peacebuilding**, and the impact of civil society actors being forced to leave their country. The role of strategic communication was highlighted.

Examples from the region demonstrate that when human rights are undermined and civil society is marginalized, CSOs often shift focus from influencing government policies and implementation to **working directly with communities to preserve civic space**. This comes with challenges in terms of divisions, social cohesion, safety and security. In such contexts, the UN and other international actors could be more proactive in supporting peacebuilding within societies, not limited to traditional post-conflict societies.

The region shows how civil society can be a trusted partner **complementing governments** also when it comes to law enforcement. CSOs can play a key role in ensuring access to local communities when mapping and recording crimes, as well as in clarifying and enhancing the understanding of judicial processes. The close correlation between the upholding of the rule of law, democracy and peacebuilding was repeatedly underlined.

VI. Using Interconnected Crises to Drive Integrated Action

Experience from the region shows how compounding crises – such as environmental degradation or conflict - can act as drivers of integrated, system-wide action as they **expose the interlinkages between human rights, development, humanitarian relief and peace, which require coordinated responses** across sectors and actors.

Participants stressed that **humanitarian actions should systematically incorporate peacebuilding** considerations from the outset. Sequencing is particularly important, as peacebuilding may often have to begin before formal peace negotiations and address the consequences of conflict as they unfold. The difference in timeline must be considered, as temporary measures can become problematic if considered long-term solutions, triggering societal divides and perceptions of injustices and inequalities. Civil society – preferably with UN support – can help play a bridging role between humanitarian relief and peacebuilding. In this context, crisis preparedness and resilience were stressed.

This region shows the importance of **cross-border cooperation** and how decades of training and expertise in one country can be leveraged to assist its neighbors in times of crisis. Lost opportunities regarding transfer of knowledge were highlighted, as well as the valuable role of civil society in data collection, especially in crisis. Moreover, the risk of a



crisis in one country becoming a cross-border interconnected crisis was noted, as well as the prevention opportunities in this regard.

With the support of multilateral actors, civil society could play a key role in pressuring governments to integrate peacebuilding considerations from the outset of a crisis. Participants suggested drawing on **civil society peacebuilding cross-border structures or dialogue channels with expert networks** available to convene when needed to help prevent or manage crises and support peace negotiations or processes.

In crises, civil society is often forced to become service providers at the expense of advocacy and peacebuilding efforts. To avoid completely abandoning their core functions requires elaborate strategic contingency planning, and thus external support is crucial.

VII. Civil Society Peacebuilding Innovations in the Region

Civil society actors in the region have learned to **adapt to rapidly changing and often restrictive environments**. This adaptability has given rise to forms of innovation that may not always be recognized by formal structures such as the UN, yet offer valuable lessons for peacebuilding practice globally.

What is meant by innovation can **differ depending on the context and on how it contributes to sustainable peace**. It does not necessarily mean creating something entirely new, but rather, it involves reshaping existing ideas, tools, and processes to make them better suited to current needs within their respective contexts.

In contexts where peace is understood simply as the absence of war, **redefining peace** to include elements of social cohesion, family well-being, inclusivity, and the fight against gender-based violence is in itself a civil society innovation.

In Ukraine, effective WPS localization has been done through **regional coalitions**, creating networks that bring together social workers, police, and other actors.

In Moldova, **confidence building tools** have been developed to strengthen community networks in support of social cohesion.

In Georgia and Azerbaijan, initiatives have aimed **to create community groups capable of acting preventatively**.

VIII. Civil society and the UN in Eastern Europe

Reflecting a broader global trust crisis, there is **growing frustration in Eastern Europe towards the UN** and peacebuilding. There is a lack of understanding of what the UN can or cannot do, highlighting the need for more regular dialogue.



The current **challenge lies in rebuilding the credibility and reliability of the UN** by rethinking how the UN engages at the local and national level. Civil society can play a vital role in this process and should be empowered to understand, monitor and hold the UN and its partners accountable, ensuring that commitments translate into real change.

Participants stressed that to ensure CSO-UN cooperation, **clearer frameworks are needed**. Without a shared understanding or coordination between the government, the UN, and civil society, efforts to face different crises remain fragmented and less effective. The UN should strengthen its role as a connector, building trust between civil society and governments and ensuring that people's voices are reflected in decision-making.

The UN and civil society can **work together to deliver essential services or maintain communication channels** in contexts where government actors are unable to do so. In Moldova, the UN has worked to identify community 'fixers', e.g. local actors who can act where formal government actors cannot, such as in Transnistria. Also in Moldova, civil society mobilized quickly after the Ukraine crisis at border crossings where authorities had limited control, assisting refugees and preventing human trafficking.

The UN also needs to invest in the preparedness of civil society partners, strengthening their institutional capacity, including in crisis and emergency response, with mechanisms in place to ensure learning. Participants suggested **standing CSO-UN committees**, possibly regional, could help facilitate quicker responses.

IX. Regional lessons for Financing for Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding requires **long-term, sustainable, and flexible funding models** and mechanisms, especially when government buy-in is weak and rapid responses needed.

A balance must be found between **maintaining a long-term strategic approach and adapting to rapidly changing contexts**. Innovation could help streamline overly bureaucratic funding systems and procedures, creating space for quicker, more flexible partnerships. Cooperation with CSOs can allow for rapid **pilot initiatives**.

Fragmented development aid reduces its efficiency and weakens its collective impact. To address this, the UN has been promoting **pooled funding mechanisms and multi-donor trust funds**, to simplify access and encourage CSO partnerships. The UN stressed that CSOs can be direct implementing partners of PBF actions and encouraged them to approach UN country teams directly with concrete ideas.

Participants highlighted that to prevent aid dependencies and ensure sustainable impact, it is important to **focus on empowering local organizations**, supporting capacity-building projects and ensuring that international support complements rather than replaces local initiatives. To enhance localization, local consultations should be integrated from the outset and throughout implementation, to guide design and action.



In some countries, donors must coordinate with governments before supporting civil society, which can place organizations at risk of fines or even imprisonment. The UN was urged to take a **stronger stance to advocate directly with governments** at the highest levels to protect civil society space and enable CSOs to operate freely.

New CSOs often struggle to gain recognition from donors, who prefer to channel funding through established partners. This practice, while reducing risk, can stop innovation and discourage fresh approaches.

X. Conclusion

Eastern Europe shares both commonalities and differences when it comes to peacebuilding. Actors in the region are at the frontline of facing many of the new challenges that are typical of the current geopolitical context. **The way in which they are adapting and transforming holds many insights for the global CSO-UN Dialogue** and for efforts to reform and improve the UN peacebuilding architecture.

At the centre of these regional lessons lies the importance of social cohesion – especially in the context of longstanding border disputes and regular forced displacements of large populations. Moreover, the key role of CSOs in building that social cohesion through dialogue, both within and across societies and countries, cannot be underestimated. **The need for the UN to work with CSOs in these contexts, to build both their resilience and preparedness, including in relation to shrinking diplomatic and civic space**, becomes clear. There is already a wealth of best practices and lessons learned from Eastern Europe in this regard, which also shows the importance of considering the need to avoid creating aid dependencies. The region holds important lessons about how the UN needs to and can adapt to the context in which it is working, notably on the basis of deep and nuanced situational awareness and accurate up to date data generated in close cooperation with civil society from the outset of any engagement.

In addition, the region holds invaluable experience and expertise about why and how to work in a whole-of-system approach. Eastern Europe has many examples of the bridging role that civil society can play in this context and between societies and institutions. **Many inspiring examples can be found throughout the region of civil society playing a key role in translating global agendas into locally owned processes**, and why global agendas should be open to being shaped and informed by local contexts. Eastern Europe also shows the power of an active and strong civil society and regional cooperation (including with regional organizations) to generate peace dividends in and across societies, and the need for more flexible, predictable and sustainable financing to this end. The Eastern Europe Sub-Regional CSO-UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding showed the **importance of working more with this region on peacebuilding**, both to strengthen connectivity within the region, and with the UN peacebuilding architecture.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- The UN should be more proactive in supporting **peacebuilding in frozen conflicts and non-traditional post-conflict societies**, with particular focus on education and civic dialogue to help youth contextualize and engage in peacebuilding.
- **Humanitarian actions should incorporate peacebuilding from the outset.** Non-linear sequencing is key as peacebuilding may have to start before peace negotiations and continue long after, whereas humanitarian actions should end.
- The UN should help establish **cross-border dialogue channels, platforms and cooperation mechanisms between CSOs**, to generate cross-community engagement and learning, enhance social cohesion, and enable rapid mobilization across regions.
- The **UN should strengthen CSOs' crisis preparedness, resilience, and institutional capabilities**, reducing their financial dependence on international donors and ensuring sustainability, with mechanisms in place to capture and apply lessons from one crisis to the next.
- The UN should **establish accountability mechanisms for CSO-UN cooperation, whereby the UN strengthens its role as connectors with governments** to advocate for and protect civic space, and inclusive and meaningful participation in policy and decision-making processes.
- **Global agendas and frameworks should be informed by local strategies** rather than expecting local contexts to conform to global priorities, ensuring flexible peacebuilding that can adapt according to the context as defined by locally generated and verified analysis and data, and local processes.
- The UN should work with CSOs to help ensure **long-term, sustainable, and flexible funding models and mechanisms for peacebuilding, as well as rapid pilot initiatives**, allowing for long and short-term flexible partnerships and prioritizing local initiatives and organizations.
- **National action plans (NAPs) should be developed and implemented collaboratively** by CSOs and governments, with realistic targets, robust accountability, progress tracking, and sufficient resourcing for implementation.
- The UN should create **schemes to support local WPS and YPS champions** (with particular focus on influencers/opinion makers), to help build trust and raise awareness of the agendas and the opportunities that they provide.
- The UN should help **strengthen institutional connections between youth and formal structures** to support trust-building and meaningful participation.