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Transforming Peacebuilding in the Eastern Neighbourhood

An overview of civil society in the South Caucasus and Moldova
in the context of the women, peace, and security agenda

PARTNERS

This research snapshot was commissioned by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting as part of its Building Resilience in the Eastern Neighbourhood work. The Global Network of Women Peacebuilders carried out the initial research interviews, complemented with updates and further desk research and interviews carried out by IWPR team members.



**INSTITUTE FOR
WAR & PEACE REPORTING**



The Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR)

The Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR) is an independent not-for profit organisation that works with media and civil society to promote positive change around the world. It has coordinating offices in the United States and the Netherlands, and a global headquarters in London, UK. IWPR works on the ground in more than 30 countries and runs programmes in, among other places, Afghanistan, the Balkans, the Baltics, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Central Europe, Kenya, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Syria, and Ukraine. IWPR has extensive and direct experience of developing a diverse array of international media initiatives IWPR's approach is built on a comprehensive needs analysis and localising ownership of interventions to build civil society and media capacity to address the local challenges to open and democratic societies.



The Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP)

The Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) builds equal, resilient and peaceful communities. GNWP is a coalition of over 100 women's rights organisations from over 50 countries around the world experiencing humanitarian crises or conflict. Its members are women and youth-led organisations who work on their communities' most difficult issues—leading the way to a better future.

GNWP works with the United Nations, governments, non-profits and local communities to bridge the gap between global policies and local action. GNWP elevates the voices of local women leaders by bringing them to global forums, so they can speak directly to policy makers, advocate for the rights of women and girls, and inform and influence better policies. GNWP helps young women and girls living in places in crisis reach their full potential through education, leadership and peacebuilding training, and economic opportunities. GNWP works to ensure that women leaders get a seat at that table and have the resources, knowledge, and skills to effectively lead responses in their communities.



Building Resilience in the Eastern Neighbourhood (BREN)

The Building Resilience in the Eastern Neighbourhood (BREN) project, delivered by IWPR in partnership with GNWP, is designed to build the resilience of CSOs to promote human security, peace, and stability in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries. It is focused on women and other marginalised groups in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova.



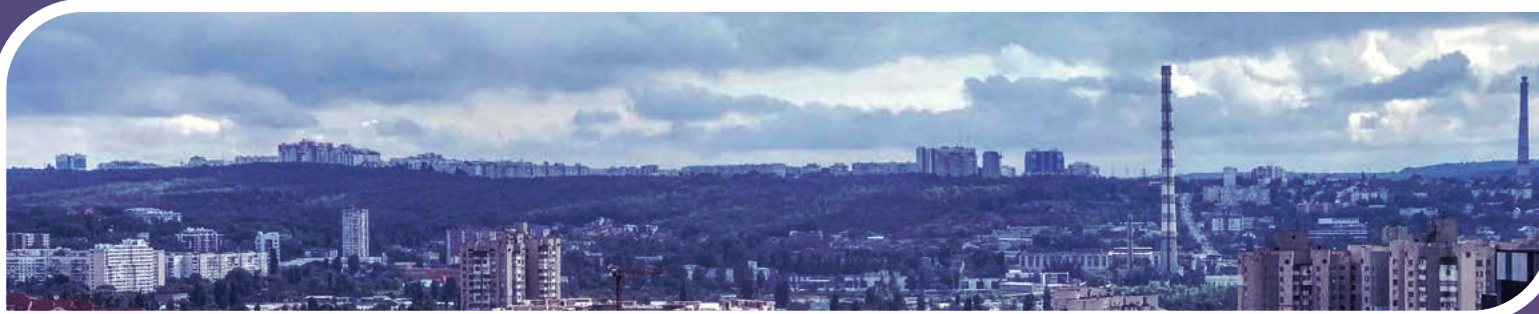
BREN is supported by the UK Government's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the UK Government.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Women in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova have made important contributions to peacebuilding and security process in the region. However, their work is often unrecognised and undervalued. This report brings to light the women’s roles in peacebuilding in the four countries, the challenges they face, and best practices in funding and supporting women-led peacebuilding work.

The report is based on [research](#) that documented the perspectives and lived experiences of local civil society actors, primarily local women, working in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. The qualitative research was carried out through interviews conducted by GNWP and its partners with representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs), including women’s rights organisations (WROs) in all four countries. The interviews were complemented by desk research, including a review of the documentation of existing projects and funding initiatives in the region and globally, to identify evidence of impact and best peacebuilding and funding practices.

The research was conducted to inform the design and implementation of a funding mechanism delivered by IWPR

and GNWP within the framework of the BREN project. The funding mechanism, which was launched in July 2022, has allocated over 2.7 million GBP to local women’s organisations between 2022-2023. These funds help them respond to critical challenges, documented in this report. More detailed country reports, including additional context, mapping and the methodology used to conduct research interviews, are available on the GNWP website.

The research revealed both differences and shared experiences between the four countries. The report’s findings, which build on interviews with representatives of CSOs and WROs with long-term experience working in these countries, highlight these challenges and suggest concrete approaches to



adequately tailoring interventions in the region. Some of the key cross-cutting themes discussed below include:

- The **precarious funding situation**, in particular of the smaller peacebuilding organisations, located outside of large urban centres and in conflict-affected regions. This finding aligns with the growing recognition and evidence globally on the importance of adequate and flexible financing for WROs, in particular at the local level. Globally, only 0.2% of the total bilateral aid targeting fragile countries goes to women’s rights organisations – a percentage that has not changed in over a decade.ⁱ The IWPR-GNWP research provides new, first-hand evidence that further supports the calls for increased flexible investment into local and marginalised WROs, by spotlighting the specific challenges faced by those on the frontlines of peacebuilding in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova. For example, it brings to light the **specific challenges faced by CSOs and WROs located in the contested and occupied regions**, due to legal restrictions
- The **role of patriarchal social norms and militarised narratives** in driving both conflict and gender-based discrimination and violence. Violence against women is prevalent across the region, although it remains severely under-reported. For example, according to a recent survey in Armenia, over 35% of women experienced physical, sexual or psychological violence in their lifetime.ⁱⁱ The in-depth, qualitative interviews conducted in the course of this research linked the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) with patriarchal and strongly militarized narratives. In Armenia specifically, the interviewees noted that stereotypes that link masculinity to strength and domination **fuel both GBV and broader militarized attitudes, which, in turn, frame peacebuilding as “women’s work” and contribute to it being perceived as less valuable**. Similar sentiments were also expressed in the other three countries, where GBV rates

are also high.¹ Across all contexts, the high rates of violence were linked to patriarchal attitudes and lack of accountability. The connection between militarized masculinities and conflict is not new and reflects global evidence.ⁱⁱⁱ

- Disproportional **risks created by misinformation and disinformation** towards minority-led CSOs and WROs. Across all four countries, fake news and hate speech were identified as a major challenge, which was further aggravated following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This has been particularly felt in Moldova, where Russian propaganda has been used as part of a hybrid warfare strategy in the occupied territory of Transnistria and in the neighbouring Gagauzia region.^{iv} In the other countries, misinformation was also a major concern: according to a major survey, 59% of Georgians and 87% of Armenians are worried about false information in the internet and social media in their country.^v

The cross-cutting themes underscore the possibility – if not the necessity – of interventions that address these challenges across the four countries. Recognising this, the research sought to answer the question: what works in supporting peacebuilding CSOs and WROs?

Based on the analysis of the existing initiatives and gaps in peacebuilding work in the region, the report identifies specific interventions that have the greatest transformative potential. These include:

- Providing **flexible, rapidly accessible financial support** to CSOs and WROs, particularly those working outside of



¹ 13.5% in Azerbaijan, 31% in Moldova, and 6% in Georgia, where 13.9% of girls also faced child marriage.

large urban centres, as well as minority-led organisations, and organisations and activists representing the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) community. Since complexity of the funding application and reporting processes^{vi} was highlighted as a key challenge, targeted technical support to help marginalized organisations **build capacity to access funding** is another solution proposed in the report.

- **Building civil society capacity to provide psychosocial support**, including gender-responsive trauma healing and counselling, to respond to the mental health impacts of the conflict.
- Supporting the **development and implementation of National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security (NAPs WPS)**, which have been shown to be powerful tools to advance women's priorities.^{vii}
- Enabling **experience exchanges** between small CSOs based outside large urban centres and their larger, capital-based counterparts.

This pragmatic focus constitutes a unique added value of the IWPR-GNWP research.

Lastly, the report also provides a snapshot of women's peacebuilding work in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Whilst initial research interviews (carried out between November 2021 and February 2022) predate the Russian invasion of Ukraine, subsequent research carried out by IWPR

has been incorporated to include analysis of its impact, including the work carried out by the BREN partner organisations in the aftermath of the invasion.

Like other global crises, the Russian invasion and its geopolitical and socioeconomic impacts have had important consequences for the work of the WROs. While some of WROs' work had to be adapted or postponed due to the increased strain on resources and the complex security situation following the invasion, other strands of their work maintained or even increased its relevance. For example, the threat of disinformation and propaganda has increased, as has the demand for digital security. The invasion has brought a new source of unpredictability and instability to the region, with possible outcomes including an ongoing frozen conflict, further armed conflict in the region, and a peaceful resolution of the war in Ukraine that could have a ripple effect across the region. Regardless, as underscored by the findings of this report, the need for financial and practical support to organisations working with women continues.

These challenges inevitably have an impact, including on research and planning activities. GNWP and its partners have good relations amongst civil society organisations in the BREN region. However, due to the nature of the limitations placed on civil society organisations and the perceived potential risks of speaking to researchers connected to 'foreign organisations' in certain areas we acknowledge that some potentially useful input may be absent. Further work with 'hard to reach' groups is planned as an ongoing part of the BREN programme.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This summary document and associated research was produced by GNWP and its local partners – peacebuilding organisations and individual researchers – on behalf of IWPR under BREN’s inception phase, which started in October 2021. GNWP worked with national and local researchers in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova, to carry out interviews, focus group discussions and a survey with a range of non-state actors between November 2021 and February 2022.

Using a **multilingual survey questionnaire**, GNWP mapped 117 organisations in all four countries, and collected data about their thematic and geographical focus, leadership, cooperation with the government, and where possible, funding sources and challenges, as well as COVID-19 impact. The organisations mapped included grassroots, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), WROs and peacebuilding organisations, herein collectively referred to as CSOs. The mapping is not a representative sample of all those operating in the region. Rather there is a focus on those organisations working in the sphere of women’s rights and peace and security.

To better understand needs and challenges faced by the mapped CSOs, local researchers conducted over 70





semi-structured interviews with key informants. In selecting the interviewees, researchers strived to ensure diversity and representation in terms of gender, age, background and ethnicity. Interviewees included representatives from CSOs, UN agencies, donor community, international and regional organisations, law enforcement agencies, embassies, and educational institutions.

Additionally, **focus group discussions** were organised. They were designed in such a way as to target minority, vulnerable, and ‘hard-to-reach’ groups, based on the understanding that some demographics tend to be under-represented in the organisations mapped through the survey.

The empirical data was put in context and complemented with a **literature and desk review**. The desk review included review of recent strategy papers and mappings carried out by GNWP itself, as well as an extensive review of relevant material published by international and national NGOs and intergovernmental organisations working in the region. It was further complemented by a subsequent analysis of the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and its aftermath

in the region, including dedicated research commissioned by IWPR on the issue.

Despite the extensive research using a range of different methodologies, there are inevitably some limitations to such an exercise. For example, in most countries, few if any of the mapped organisations are led by minorities, such as LGBTQI+ individuals or people with disabilities. The reason for that is particular marginalisation of these groups. Future research to specifically explore and better understand the unique needs of these groups, and the organisations that represent them, would be valuable.

Furthermore, not all organisations agreed to be interviewed. In some cases, this was due to lack of time or other issues outside the researchers’ control. However, in some cases organisations were reluctant to openly speak about their operations. This may be caused by the desire not to attract attention, or the overall lack of trust among CSOs towards actors perceived as external.

For more detail on methodology, interviews, and participants, please refer to separate [country reports](#).

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS



The research sought to provide insights into the context, in which the local CSOs and WROs operate, as well as the main challenges they face in their work on peacebuilding and Women, Peace and Security (WPS), and their related needs.

The summary report begins with an analysis of these common challenges. It provides concrete recommendations for regional-level interventions to address these challenges. It then proceeds to outlining each country-specific context, paying particular attention to the human rights situation and its impact on the work of the CSOs and WROs, context-specific drivers of conflict and instability and of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), as well as potential opportunities for women's and WROs' participation in peace and security processes. Based on this analysis, the country-specific sections shed light on the needs of CSOs and WROs operating in each country, and provide recommendations for tailored responses. More in-depth country reports are also available on GNWP website.

Overall, the research identified a **number of mutually reinforcing barriers faced by WROs** in their peacebuilding work: **gendered impacts of conflict (including GBV), lack of**

access to justice and disinformation and hate speech that often targets women activists are all issues that WROs seek to address, and that they are themselves affected by. All of these are underpinned by **patriarchal social norms** that are pervasive in all four societies and enmeshed with militarized narratives and attitudes that drive conflict and insecurity. The research identified some hopeful practices that seek to address these barriers and transform the very norms that fuel violence and conflict. Based on the evidence from the region and a vast body of already existing research and literature the report identifies gender-responsive policies (including National Action Plans – NAPs – on WPS) and direct and flexible funding for WROs and grassroots CSOs as potential drivers of transformative peacebuilding. However, the analysis shows that **gaps in funding for WROs and weak implementation of NAPs on WPS** are critical barriers that perpetuate the patriarchal social norms and the challenges faced by WROs and CSOs as a result.

CRITICAL BARRIERS TO CHANGE

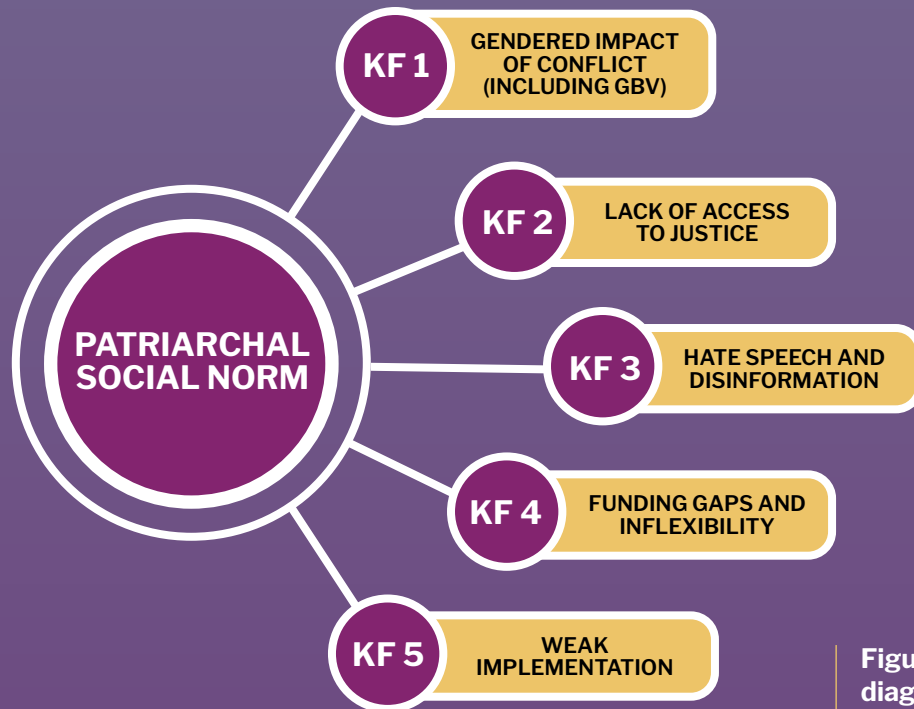


Figure 1: Barriers to Change diagram based on five key findings of the research



Cross-cutting findings

1. Understanding and addressing gendered harms: Embracing holistic approaches to peace and human security to tackle GBV and mental health crisis

Across the region, the research documented significant differences in how conflict and insecurity affect people of different genders. Gendered impacts of conflict included prevalence of GBV – both directly related to conflict and happening in the private sphere – and impacts of conflict on the mental wellbeing of women, men and LGBTIQ+ persons.

The research has also revealed a **strong correlation between the attitudes and norms that perpetuate GBV and other forms of violence against women**, and those that drive

conflict and insecurity more broadly. This, once again, is aligned with the current state of knowledge about the importance of social norms – including those related to gender – in sustaining both gender in equality and conflict.^{viii}

The research shed light on the specific manifestation of this phenomenon in the region. Overall, as demonstrated in Figure 2, all four countries do relatively well in global gender equality indexes, including the Global Gap Index, which measures progress towards achieving gender parity across four

dimensions (Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment) and the Women, Peace and Security index, which captures three dimensions of women's inclusion (economic, social, political), justice (formal laws and informal discrimination), and security (at the individual, community, and societal levels). All four countries generally scored just below or just above the global average for each index – although still retaining important space for improvement. However, the apparent progress towards gender equality does not necessarily reflect the broader social attitudes towards women and gender.

“In the conflict zone, if we talk about the difference with gender bias, then men were tortured and killed. Women were captured were raped by soldiers. Refugees and IDPs have some big problems: loss of their homes, lack of permanent housing, lack of living conditions, unemployment, loss of the head of the family. The woman took on the functions of the head of the family and the keeper of the hearth, supporting the family, raising children. Often the men of the family went to work in other countries. Sometimes they did not return to their families.”

SOURCE: RESEARCH INTERVIEW, AZERBAIJAN

GENDER EQUALITY INDICES COMPARISON

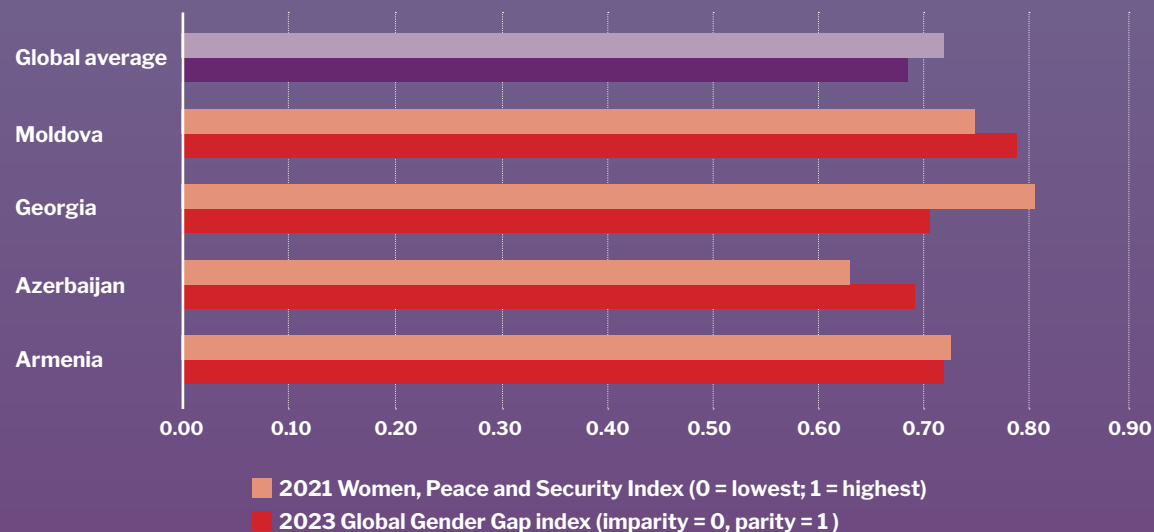


Figure 2: Gender equality indexes scores.

Source: World Economic Forum 2023; Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security 2022.

suffering because of Armenian attacks or sending their sons “to fight for their country” have been used in the propaganda that has supported the war effort.

Across the region, the framing of women as victims of conflict can be viewed as a factor contributing to the **overall low representation of women in peace negotiations in the four contexts**. In negotiations between Armenia and

For example, in **Armenia**, research participants pointed out that militarized narratives, which are prevalent and seen as one of the drivers of conflict, have a strong gender dimension. They are rooted in stereotypes that link masculinity to strength and domination. These stereotypes fuel both GBV and militarized attitudes, in particular following the 2022 Nagorno-Karabakh war. The militarized attitudes, in turn, frame peacebuilding as “women’s work” and contribute to it being perceived as less valuable, making WROs’ work more challenging. In a similar vein, in **Azerbaijan**, the research found that images of women

Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh, no women have been included. In Georgia, women constituted 21% of negotiators in the December 2019 Geneva International Discussions (GID) format.^{ix} Some efforts have also been made to include WROs in consultations surrounding the GID. However, research participants largely viewed these as insufficient and did not feel that there was a space for them to influence the discussions. In Moldova, two women from the national government were acting as lead negotiators within the Transnistrian settlement process, and women were included in the working groups linked to the

process. However, despite their presence, “gender equality issues are rarely considered and discussed.”^x

These **gendered dynamics around the issues of conflict and peacebuilding in four countries shape the environment in which CSOs and WROs operate.** They also contribute to the gendered nature of the impacts the conflict has on women, men and LGBTQI+ persons. The research identified to **key manifestations of the gendered impact of conflicts: the prevalence of GBV and the mental health effects.**

With regards to GBV, the official recorded rates vary across the region. However, the official rates are likely to be underestimated due to under-reporting caused by the lack of confidence in the justice system, as described below.

“Patriarchal culture is a driver of gender-based violence. It legitimizes violence and makes it the norm. It also deprives the injured party or victim from realising an alternative model.”

SOURCE: MOLDOVA RESEARCH INTERVIEW

Research participants underscored that although legal frameworks which promote gender equality and prevent GBV exist across all four contexts, they are often not duly implemented and fall short in combating engrained patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes. Moreover, COVID-19 has exacerbated GBV and deepened gender inequality globally and within the region, increasing the urgency of action. Consequently, the **research highlighted the need to better integrate initiatives that tackle GBV with peacebuilding activities, in line with human security approaches which recognise the violence happening on the frontlines and within households as parts of a continuum.**

The research also pointed to other forms of gendered insecurity experienced by women, men and LGBTQI+ persons across the four countries. One of the impacts that was most often cited as the most neglected was the **impact of conflict on mental health and wellness.** Trauma created by conflict affects people of all genders, but the impact on each group is gendered. Research participants highlighted that more attention to these differences is needed in designing and implementing responses.

WROs across the four countries saw addressing everyday insecurity faced by women and LGBTQI+ individuals as part of their peacebuilding mandate. This echoes evidence from the global level, which demonstrates that including mental health concerns in peacebuilding initiatives can increase their effectiveness and help address root causes of violence.

“The stress remains on [IDPs]’ minds. Men often behave as if they are strong, however, the fact is that they often are in stressful situations and it translates into domestic violence”

SOURCE: CSO INTERVIEW GEORGIA

For example, research carried out between 2021 and 2022 demonstrated that mental health interventions can lead to improving trust between communities and increasing the quality and frequency of interactions across social divides.^{xi} This could be particularly significant in the context of Armenia and Azerbaijan, where research participants shared that there was “some progress” in building trust between Armenian and Azerbaijani women prior to 2020, but it collapsed following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war.

Accordingly, supporting and building on the already existing initiatives to provide psychosocial support, in particular to marginalized groups, can lead to more effective and transformative peacebuilding.



2. No justice, no peace: Access to justice as a barrier to peacebuilding

All case study countries were marked by disparities in the extent to which different groups can access justice. This means that state structures are not always effective in ensuring safety of particular groups, such as activists and minorities, including LGBTQI+ representatives.

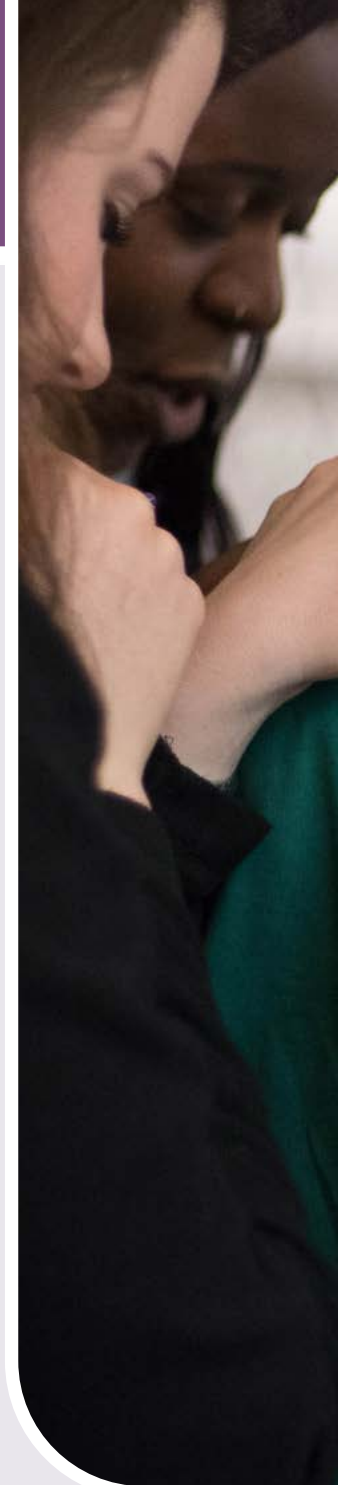
Insufficient access to justice was identified as a **barrier to effective peacebuilding work** by CSOs and WROs, as it made it more difficult for them to face, and overcome, other challenges such as GBV, as well as threats, violence and insecurity, as described below.

Research participants also highlighted that the limited access to justice contributed to creating a **culture of impunity** for violence – including in particular GBV and violence against minorities, such as LGBTQI+ persons. This, in turn, contributed to perpetuation of militarized narratives and violent attitudes in the region more broadly.

The reasons for the shortcomings of the justice system converged across the region, with some notable variations. Across all four countries, **patriarchal social norms and lack of the understanding of GBV and other forms of gendered violence** was cited as a key barrier to accessing justice. For example, in Moldova, 55 per cent of respondents surveyed by OSCE in a country-wide study agreed that GBV is a “private matter” and should be handled at home. GNWP research revealed similar attitudes in the other three countries. However, the lack of gender sensitivity manifested itself differently in each specific context:

- In **Azerbaijan**, the lack of gender sensitivity was apparent in the fact that **judges lack sufficient knowledge on how to implement the existing domestic violence law**. As a result, they tend to place the perpetrators’ rights (such as their right to property) above those of the victim, for example when adjudicating about protective orders.^{xii}
- In **Moldova**, the lack of gender-sensitivity including among the police (who were reported to mock victims when reporting cases of GBV) has led to a **deterioration of trust** in the judicial system.
- In **Georgia**, access to justice was reportedly limited in particular for **LGBTQI+ persons** – for example, research participants noted the limited response and lack of accountability for far-right groups that attacked the participants of the 2021 Pride march in Tbilisi.
- Lastly, in the contexts where **CSOs face legal restrictions to their operations – in particular in the contested and occupied regions**, these also serve as a barrier to accessing justice and recourse when facing threats.

The research has documented **existing initiatives providing free legal support and access to justice for the most vulnerable groups, including LGBTQI+ persons and minorities**, who were shown to face most severe barriers to accessing justice. Expanding and supporting such initiatives can contribute to removing some of the barriers to accessing justice outlined above.





3. Defend the defenders: Addressing the insecurity, disinformation and hate speech faced by women peace activists

The research suggests that civil society activists are at risk across the region, with the contested territories providing a particularly hostile environment for activists. Specific threats to activists vary, but the principle of ensuring their safety is vital.

While, overall, the increasing levels of insecurity amongst CSO representatives and women activists reflect broader global trends, a finding specific to the region was that **much of the violence against activists was underpinned by misinformation and disinformation.**

Across the region, **smear campaigns and hate speech against CSO activists** are widespread and have intensified in recent years, in particular with the increased use of online spaces in peacebuilding and advocacy, which was catalysed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The root causes and specificities of the hate speech and disinformation aimed at undermining peace activists' work varied across the region:

- In **Armenia and Azerbaijan**, where a strongly militarised understanding of security prevails, a **high prevalence of hate speech and intimidation is faced by non-state actors adopting more peaceful narratives.** This effectively marginalises narratives focusing on peace, human security, and long-term stability which are promoted by women peacebuilders and women's rights organisations.
- In **Georgia and Moldova, minority-led organisations, particularly those led by LGBTQI+ persons,** were primarily targeted with hate speech.

Across the region, **censorship of some information and existing social dynamics which created a fertile ground for malicious information on minority groups,** exacerbated the insecurity experienced by CSO and WRO representatives. They also created obstacles to CSOs accessing credible data to inform their work.



4. Pathways to sustainability: flexible targeted funding, technical support and peer-to-peer learning

Across the region, lack of access to adequate and sustainable funding, coupled with limited organisational capacities and lack of opportunities to enhance them, were identified as a key factor limiting the efficiency of peacebuilding and WROs' capacity to address the barriers they face.

This is consistent with the body of evidence from across the world. While women's contributions to reaching peace agreements and ensuring their sustainability^{xiii}, as well as building social cohesion^{xiv} has been well documented, there is also ample evidence that their work is severely underfunded and often done on voluntary basis.^{xv} The precarity of the funding for women's organisations makes them more vulnerable to financial shocks and makes it more difficult for them to react and adapt^{xvi} - as evidenced, for example, during the COVID-19 crisis, during which many local women's rights organisations felt their very existence was at risk due to shifting donor priorities^{xvii} - despite the fact they were at the forefront of responding to the pandemic and the new security risks it created.^{xviii} Recognising this reality, the 2020 UN Secretary-General report on Women, Peace and Security concluded that "to ensure that women leaders and organisations working for peace in fragile contexts have access to sustainable funding must be a priority."^{xix}

The analysis of the four countries aligns with these global trends, while exhibiting some important regional particularities. Specifically, interviewees highlighted that the access to funding is **exacerbated for smaller organisations, organisations led by minorities (including ethnic minorities and LGBTQI+ people), and organisations located outside of the urban centres, and those in the contested or occupied territories.** These organisations often had lower overall organisational capacities, making it more difficult to meet complex donor requirements. The short term and project-based nature of most funding opportunities also made it more difficult to build their capacity over time.

Another finding that resonated strongly across the region was that **when funding exists, it is often not adapted to meet CSOs and WROs' specific needs.** It was noted that financial support is often short-term and inflexible. While this also reflects a broader global trend^{xx}, the specific perspective from the region was that **funding and technical support to build organisational capacities, and funding for the protection of women peace activists, human rights activists and LGBTQI+ activists was particularly lacking.** The former included lack of dedicated funding for training in developing quality needs-oriented services for local communities, for example to address GBV or other gendered impacts of conflict. Such trainings would contribute to more sustainable action on the ground, and support grassroots organisations in applying for other funding opportunities.

Finally, organisations indicated that there was a **particular shortage of funding opportunities in the area of WPS,** which made those focusing on the work at the intersection of gender equality and peacebuilding particularly vulnerable to underfunding. Research participants noted that funding was often dictated by donor priorities rather than the needs on the ground, and thus prone to dwindling as global priorities shifted – for example, during COVID-19. Furthermore, funding was often available within the framework of short-term projects, demanding immediate results. This made it more difficult for grassroots organisations to invest in long-term capacity-building and transformative actions to challenge root causes of conflict and gender inequality, such as patriarchal norms and militarised narratives.

These broad trends were reiterated across the four countries. However, the research also identified some regional variation in terms of how the insufficient financial and technical support is felt in the four countries:

- Organisations based in **Azerbaijan** face specific **legal restrictions** to receiving funding, which makes it extremely difficult to obtain financial support from international actors. As a result, many activists have resorted to signing individual consultancy contracts with international organisations as a form of securing funding for their work.
- In **Armenia**, where lack of access to funding was identified

“Funding opportunities usually take form of calls for short-term, temporary projects. This makes long-term planning difficult, if not impossible. Hence, instead of being guided by their strategic plans, CSOs continue to adapt their work and focus to meet donor priorities and requirements.”

SOURCE: CSO INTERVIEW

as the most significant obstacle to CSO and WRO functioning, organisations felt that the challenging relationship with the government made that there was an **over-reliance on external funding**, yet without opportunities to strengthen capacities and plan for long-term action.

- In **Georgia**, the challenges in funding were exacerbated for organisations based, or operating in **Abkhazia and South Ossetia**, as bank transactions within the contested territories were not possible, and the travel between those territories and Georgia only possible through Russia-controlled checkpoints, making communication and coordination extremely challenging.

Closing the funding gap is of critical importance to ensuring transformative peacebuilding. The positive impact of women’s participation on peacebuilding has been well-documented globally. WROs have been at the forefront of advancing the WPS agenda^{xxi} and of addressing crises, such as COVID-19^{xxii}. Investing in them must therefore be a priority.

On a more hopeful note, research participants shared positive experiences of exchanges with other organisations and felt that in many cases, **organisations can learn from each other, and peer-learning can help close the gaps in organisational capacity**. This is particularly important given the **disproportional challenges faced by some of the CSOs, as outlined above**.





5. Leveraging global normative frameworks to support local peacebuilding: National Action Plans on WPS

Across the four countries, women peace activists viewed the WPS agenda as an important framework to support their work.

The WPS agenda is constituted by 10 UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR), first of which – UNSCR 1325 was adopted in 2000. It provides a normative framework for women’s participation in conflict prevention, peace processes and decision-making on peace and security, as well as their protection in conflict and post-conflict contexts.^{xxiii} **National Action Plans (NAPs) have been recognised globally as useful tools** to domesticate the agenda and provide an opening for women’s rights organisations to advance their work and advocacy.^{xxiv}

Internationally-recognised best practice shows that in order to ensure that the NAP can reach its transformative potential, an inclusive process and coordination structure with clear integration of CSOs and WROs are key.^{xxv} The four countries have ensured this integration in varying degrees:

- **Armenia** adopted its second NAPs in 2022. While the drafting process included some consultations with the civil society, CSOs and WROs had limited impact on the NAPs content, which results in many of the critical issues missing from it.

- **Azerbaijan** still considers the formal adoption of its first document. However, a draft of the document was made publicly available. The draft builds on an initial version of the document developed by the civil society, which was subsequently discussed and edited by the relevant government ministries. However, the communication and coordination between the government and civil society during the finalization stages of the document was limited at best.
- **Georgia** has formally adopted its fourth NAP on WPS in 2022. The NAP was developed with strong participation of the civil society. Thanks to the civil society participation and advocacy, Georgia’s third and fourth NAPs include important transformative provisions, including on addressing mental health needs of IDP women and providing them with economic opportunities.^{xxvi}
- **Moldova** adopted its second NAP in 2023. The NAP was with participation of diverse CSOs and WROs, and built on lessons learned from the first NAP, including the need to integrate a strong gender lens. As a result, the NAPs touch on a number of critical issues.

Relatedly, the extent to which each NAP addressed the key barriers to the peacebuilding work of WROs differed. Figure 3 demonstrates the frequency of mentions of different key words related to the above analysis in the four NAPs. Interestingly, none of the NAPs mention the issues of hate speech, misinformation (also including keywords “disinformation”, “fake news” and “propaganda”) and patriarchy and/or militarism and militarised narratives, despite the fact that these were recognised as critical issues for peace and for WRO and CSO functioning in the region.



Figure 3: Number of mentions of key barriers to transformative peacebuilding by NAPs

Moreover, across the four countries, the implementation of the NAPs in the contested or occupied regions remains a challenge, limiting the transformative potential of the agenda. A promising practice applied both globally and in the region to advance the implementation of the WPS agenda is localisation. Globally, the **localisation approach** has been seen to be most successful as part of a *'people-based, bottom-up strategy... which convenes key local actors.'*^{xxvii} There is ample evidence of transformative impacts of localisation. For example, in Colombia, GNWP-led localisation process supported indigenous women's organizing, which ultimately led to the establishment of the Indigenous

Women's Network and adoption of a Indigenous Women's Action Plan, to ensure and monitor the implementation of the WPS resolutions in indigenous communities.^{xxviii} In Georgia, localisation's concrete result was the establishment of a bus line between the village of Ganmukhuri and the bigger town of Zugdidi, which in turn allowed women to access economic opportunities and political spaces.

In the four case study countries, it can become an avenue for the engagement of joint state and non-state actors in discussions about gender equality and women's everyday needs and security.



Cross-cutting recommendations – towards transformative peacebuilding through more tailored support to CSOs in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Moldova²

To close the gap in funding faced by CSOs and WROs and support sustainability of their work:

- 1. Provide flexible funding, as well as technical support designed to enhance their capacities to apply for and manage future grants, to local and minority-led civil society organisations.** These organisations should be specifically targeted, because they face disproportional barriers in their peacebuilding work.
- 2. Provide diverse funding types such as grants-in-aid, grants-in-kind and technical and capacity-building support for CSOs, in particular on grant-writing and digital literacy to access calls published online.**
- 3. Enable and encourage networking and experience-sharing among peacebuilding CSOs and WROs.** This could help CSOs strengthen organisational capacities, promote the efficiency and impact of their activities, and ensure their long-term sustainability. To implement this recommendation, BREN should support **communication and experience exchanges between CSOs in major towns and cities and small CSOs** based outside of large urban centres, in particular those led by women, youth and LGBTQI+ persons. This could be done, for example through support to **networks, or peer-to-peer mentorship and learning.**

To improve access to justice and challenge the culture of impunity that fuels conflict and GBV:

- 1. Provide funding and technical support to build capacities on specific mechanisms to access justice, to these existing initiatives aimed at improving access to justice for marginalised groups, to catalyse their impact and expand their reach.** This can take form of providing resources and training to WROs, women peacebuilders, human rights defenders and journalists on practical tools and mechanisms on how to access justice.
- 2. In order to remove the legal restrictions faced by CSOs, it is recommended to fund those CSOs that are capable to engage state actors and that push forward transformative change towards better legal environment for CSO operations.**

To effectively address gendered impacts of conflict across the region:

- 1. Support civil society-led initiatives to improve access to justice, including trauma-informed legal counselling, advocacy, and legal services to victims of violence, as well as both new and existing hotline and rapid response initiatives.**

² All recommendations are directed to donors and international partners. Most of these have also been used to inform and shape the funding mechanism developed as part of the BREN project.

2. **Support and promote in particular initiatives aimed at providing psychosocial support and counselling** to women, men and LGBTQI+ persons affected by war.
3. **Support initiatives and encourage partnerships among non-state and state actors aimed at raising awareness around GBV, including through the promotion of the WPS agenda.**

To protect CSOs, WROs and women and minority peace activists against hate speech, smear campaigns and malicious disinformation:

1. Promote and fund the creation of **safe spaces for activists, especially women and LGBTQI+ activists**, to prioritise their well-being and facilitate access to emergency psychological support.
2. **Build women and LGBTQI+ activists' resilience to hate speech, intimidation and smear campaigns through capacity building in cyber security, psychosocial health, as well as in specific means of accessing justice.** Additionally, support should be provided for advocacy campaigning to hold law enforcement accountable for the crimes committed against LGBTQI+ groups and minorities.
3. **Support creative, media and community advocacy**

projects to expose disinformation, counter negative cultural attitudes in order to target disinformation.

4. **Provide trainings for journalists that provide them with skills and capacities to conduct gender- and conflict-sensitive analysis in their reporting**, and support civil society initiatives that engage with the media to prevent the spread of misinformation and disinformation.
5. **Provide incentives for more gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive content, such as media competitions**, as well as for exposing gendered disinformation campaigns that feature fake stories, threats, or humiliating and sexually charged images, and their links with wider a propaganda agenda that aims to undermine societal cohesion.

To leverage the potential of the WPS agenda to address gendered impacts of conflict and transform the gender norms that fuel it:

1. **Support civil society-led advocacy with the regional governments to adopt and implement the NAPs on WPS.** The advocacy should be tailored to each specific context, as detailed in the country-specific recommendations below.
2. **Support and expand the localisation of the WPS across the four countries, and in particular in the contested regions.**

Country-specific findings and recommendations

This section provides country-specific insights for each of the four case-study countries. The country-specific analysis was conducted along five key axes, summarised in the table below. The five areas were established inductively, based on the evidence collected through the research, to represent the key issues currently faced by non-state actors in the region. The table provides a rating between 1 and 5 for each axis and each country. The 5-point scale was adapted from Oxfam's Civic Space Monitoring Tool, and the definitions of each level are aligned with those outlined in the tool.^{xxix} The ratings were assigned by the GNWP team in consultation with local researchers and based on the data collected during the mapping carried out within the *BREN* project.

The table reveals an overall mixed record in terms of meeting the key needs of the civil society, with a large regional variation, in particular on the indicators of access to information, access to funding and legal frameworks regulating civil society.

Critically, it should be remembered that the research came at a time where a number of intersecting crises have further aggravated the challenges faced by the civil society. These included: the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which reduced revenue, created new operational constraints and increased demand for services, as well wider geopolitical challenges in the region, such as the consequences of the 2nd Nagorno-Karabakh war in late 2020, the crisis in Belarus, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in March 2022. All of these

crises have diverted funding away from core work on WPS, shifted political dynamics in the region and within each country, and created new challenges, such as an influx of refugees or internally displaced persons. The key findings below provide a more in-depth analysis of the situation in each country along the five axes. For further details and analysis, please see the country-specific reports available on GNWP's website.

Environment/Civil Space	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Georgia	Moldova
1. Legal frameworks regulating civil society	5	2	4	3
2. Access to funding for civil society	2	2	4	5
3. Safety, security and civil society space	3	3	3.5	3
4. Access to information	3	1	3	5
5. Access to justice	3	2	4	2
Average rating	3.2	2	3.7	3.6

1 - Closed

2 - Repressed

3 - Obstructed

4 - Narrowed

5 - Open

In Focus: The Russian invasion of Ukraine

As part of the BREN project, IWPR commissioned [additional research](#) looking specifically on the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the resilience of civil society organisations in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova. Research interviews with CSO representatives, activists and experts working on peace and security, minority and human rights and governance, as well as international organisations and diplomatic representations, were conducted from October 2022 to February 2023, with follow up desk research. Where relevant, this has been incorporated into this report.

Overall, civil society actors across the region had divergent views on the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the peacebuilding prospects in the broader region. Some interviewees believed that there is increased potential for peaceful conflict resolution due to power shifts brought about by the invasion. Others, however, expressed concern that the declining role and reputation of Russia has either temporarily stalled or weakened the negotiation platforms where Russia is a party.

Having said that, the research found clear evidence of negative impacts of the invasion on the civil society space in the four case study countries. This was most pronounced with regards to (1) disinformation and hate speech; (2) increased fear and security concerns linked to hybrid conflict; and (3) the economic situation, which impacts the financial situation of the civil society.



The report states that **“CSOs are the target of disinformation and propaganda in all four countries. The rise of right-wing conservative groups who proliferate anti-Western myths is connected to Russia. According to the respondents in all four countries, the messages of such groups are almost identical and portray the CSOs as ‘Western agents’, who want to undermine traditional values.”**



The increased in disinformation and hate speech was most pronounced in occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia and in Transnistria region of Moldova, where Russia maintains military presence and has gained strong cultural influence. The **'de facto' governments in all three regions have tended to be supportive of Kremlin propaganda** against Ukraine and have increased their anti-Western rhetoric following the invasion. As well as propaganda and false narratives, divisive content is promoted which often plays on stereotypes and deeply ingrained prejudices. It sometimes seeks to incite hatred, xenophobia and has included calls for violence.

Even though the attitudes and narratives across Georgia and Moldova varied, with some leaning more towards the West, the pro-Russian sentiments that are seen in the contested regions and to a lesser extent in the broader society, have the potential to further marginalise 'outsider voices' and peaceful narratives. For example, in Georgia, the war in Ukraine was used as an

excuse by politicians to spread misinformation and discredit their political opponents by suggesting their ties to Russia or support to the invasion.

The invasion of Ukraine has also affected the **security situation in the region**. Across the region, 'hybrid threats' are an ongoing challenge. These combine military and civilian tactics, some of which are covert and can include disinformation, cyber-attacks, and economic pressure (including energy policy) as well as military operations. While these are by their nature unpredictable, there is a perception that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has aggravated the threats.

Clearly, these threats have potential to affect the ability of the civil society to achieve their peacebuilding goals. However, it is important to note that the invasion did not create these threats, but rather aggravated already existing risks, which are discussed in this report.

“The role of Russia has been declining in the region, mostly due to its preoccupation with the war in Ukraine. This has created opportunities for the US and EU to play a more active role in the region. At the same time, this has the potential of more direct interactions between the Georgian government and the people in occupied regions, same with Moldova.”

SOURCE: IMPACT OF RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE ON THE SITUATION IN ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN, GEORGIA, AND MOLDOVA, IWPR RESEARCH REPORT, IWPR

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has also generated **economic shocks** that are felt across the region. Most of Moldova experiences power cuts and a hike in fuel costs due to Russia's increasing its gas prices. This has increased the cost of operations for civil society organisations, placing additional demands on the already limited resources they can access. On the contrary, Azerbaijan finds its economy growing due to increased demand for its gas as part of the EU's energy security plans which seek an alternative to Russian gas supplies. However, this additional revenue has not strengthened the position of civil society either generally, or in relation to women, peace, and security issues, as Azerbaijan's civil society

continues to struggle to access resources following the 2014 legal changes, discussed below.

The financial pressure on civil society organisations across the region, but in particular in Moldova and Georgia, has also increased as they have dealt with an influx of refugees fleeing the conflict. Meanwhile, Armenia finds itself with an influx of exiled Russian-speaking bloggers, journalists, and activists.

“National consent is required for resilience against the Russian narrative.”

SOURCE: RESEARCH INTERVIEW, GEORGIA

While there are clearly new dynamics at play, the draft report underscores that they are mostly a continuation or aggravation of pre-existing conditions. It concludes: **“While the war in Ukraine is a significant development in the region, according to the interviewees, it has mostly either uncovered or further exacerbated already existing difficulties in the region.”** In terms of the adaptation to the new and dynamic situation, given the uncertainty and fast-changing nature of both the conflict and the geopolitical situation it creates, predicting the next steps seems to be less fruitful than ensuring that resilience is built into systems and planned activities.



ARMENIA

The peacebuilding context in Armenia is defined to a large extent by the ongoing conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Although the territory is internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan, according to the last official census in 2015, ethnic Armenians made up “an overwhelming majority” of the region.^{xxx} This has changed following the latest military operation conducted by Azerbaijan, following which reportedly “[n]early the entire ethnic Armenian population has left Nagorno-Karabakh”.^{xxxi}

The conflict over the region dates back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The authorities of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast first demanded to transfer control over the region from Azerbaijan to Armenia, and then declared independence in 1991, which led to a full scale war, thousands of casualties and hundreds of thousands of displacements.^{xxxii} Despite a 1994 ceasefire and ongoing mediation efforts spearheaded by the OSCE, tensions remained high, with frequent reports of ceasefire violations on both sides.^{xxxiii} The tensions escalated into another full-scale war in September 2020. The six weeks of fighting resulted in over 6,000 casualties, over 75,000 displacements, and an exacerbated tension which has affected

civil society organisations on both sides. As this report was being finalised, Nagorno-Karabakh witnessed another bout of violence – this time, a “lighting military operation” by Azerbaijan, which led to a mass exodus of ethnic Armenians from the country, followed by the *de facto* president of the self-declared republic signing a decree dissolving the Nagorno-Karabakh state institutions, effective from 1 January 2024.^{xxxiv} At the same time, international observers have pointed out that the new *status quo* “in no way means that the conflict is resolved”^{xxxv} and called for prioritising trauma-informed mediation efforts and early warning of potential intra-community tensions in the aftermath of the latest developments.

New challenges, ongoing militarisation of public discourse

This latest development will have a significant impact on the peacebuilding context and the operations of women's rights organisations in Armenia. On the one hand, the Azerbaijani offensive reportedly led to over 100,000 people fleeing Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia.^{xxxvi} This is likely to increase the demand and pressure on WROs, who are often at the frontline of delivering services to the displaced people and those affected by war. The new wave of displacement adds to the influx of Russians following the invasion of Ukraine. Some analysts have viewed this increase in a positive light, pointing out that it has helped Armenia's economy grow: its GDP grew a record 12.6 per cent last year, with the IMF predicting future growth.^{xxxvii} However, it has also created new burdens for Armenian CSOs. Armenian organisations – including in particular grassroots organisations and WROs – have mobilised to provide support and address basic needs of those fleeing the conflict.

On the other hand, the military operation is likely to further deepen the sense of collective trauma reported by those who took part in GNWP's research. Those interviewed by GNWP and its local partners in 2021-2022 noted that the vast majority of the people believe that conflict resolution is not possible without violence. They stressed that the hate towards the 'enemy' – Azerbaijan – became more ingrained following the 2020 war. These narratives are likely to further increase following the latest developments. As noted by the interviewees, this limits the space for positive peace and decreases the possibility of mutual coexistence with Azerbaijan, or even exchanges



between Armenian and Azerbaijani women peacebuilders. This, in turn, creates a very unfavourable environment for peacebuilding CSOs and WROs.

“The situation is worse after the war, the militarisation has increased more disgracefully and that gender inequality is so strong that women, seeing all this, even when before the war they said something, now do not say anything at all.”

SOURCE: CSO INTERVIEW ARMENIA



Civil society in Armenia: strong and dynamic, but faced with challenges

The new challenges are set against the background of an uneasy relationship between the Armenian civil society and authorities.

Armenia boasts a well-established and dynamic civil society sector, with at least 5,000 CSOs registered in Armenia are active. Most of the organisations currently operational in Armenia registered between 2000 and 2010, which was a period of hope and opportunities for dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Despite the proliferation of CSOs, civil society has faced important barriers to its peacebuilding work, many fuelled by the difficulties in cooperating with the government. An example of this was the process of development of Armenia's first NAP on WPS in 2017-18 during which – despite ongoing civil society advocacy – civil society representatives were rarely, if ever, invited to government meetings about the NAP, or even informed about them.

The 2018 mass protests, dubbed the 'Velvet Revolution', led to an opening up of civic space and increased freedom of speech, assembly, and participation in political processes.^{xxxviii} GNWP interviewees recalled a feeling of hope that accompanied the unseating of the Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan and the election of Nikol Pashinyan in his place. According to a 2021 People in Need report^{xxxix}, the revolution and civilian-led protests also changed the way the government perceived civil

society, moving away from an antagonistic relationship that characterised the pre-Revolution era. As a result, the focus of civil society activity shifted towards research, advocacy, and policy work as the opportunities to influence government action were seen to have increased.

Still, significant barriers to the civil society work, in particular in the peacebuilding sector, remained. According to CIVICUS, a global civil society alliance and monitor, Armenia's civic space is rated as "obstructed", due to heavy-handed treatment of protesters and harm to journalists.^{xl} Freedom House noted the amendment of legislation, which increased fines for insults and defamation.^{xli} However, their implementation is slow, and, as discussed in more detail in the overarching findings section, GNWP's interviewees noted that defamation and smear campaigns are commonplace, in particular against women activists.

Funding for civil society organisations – a key barrier

Armenia scored lowest on the access to funding for civil society indicator. According to the GNWP research, this is primarily due to a heavy reliance of civil society on foreign funding. In 2021, the

Armenian government amended a law governing the allocation of government grants to NGOs. However, as of 2022, there was no clarity on whether the law was implemented and the online application system, designed to improve accessibility of funds, was not set up.

The over-reliance on external funds, coupled with shifting donor priorities, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, led to many peacebuilding organisations struggling to sustain their operations.

“It is not a secret that inequality in fact exists, especially in terms of influencing decisions.... Lately, to my delight, I have started to notice that it has begun to change, especially in the local government elections... I notice an increase in the role of women, that there are already women candidates, and it is gratifying that we will already have women candidates in decision-making.”

SOURCE: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION ARMENIA





Possible interventions in Armenia

Based on the findings of the mapping, these are examples of initiatives that could be supported within the scope of the BREN project to address some of the key challenges faced by Armenian WROs

Initiative/Action	Expected Outcomes
<p>Advocacy with the government of Armenia for the implementation of the second NAP on WPS, in collaboration with civil society, and with particular emphasis on human security, including issues of gender-based violence driven by conflict and militarised culture, violence and harassment faced by women peacebuilders, and discrimination faced by internally displaced persons, religious, gender and sexual minorities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There are clear mechanisms for civil society participation in the implementation and monitoring of the progress on the implementation of Armenia’s 2nd NAP on WPS ● The government of Armenia undertakes specific actions aimed at addressing (i) militarised narratives; and (ii) violence and harassment faced by women peacebuilders; and (iii) discrimination faced by minorities, within the scope of the NAP.
<p>Gender-responsive and locally-led response to the mass displacement from Nagorno-Karabakh</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A gender-responsive assessment of the needs of the displaced people from Nagorno-Karabakh is conducted

Initiative/Action	Expected Outcomes
<p>Gender-responsive and locally-led response to the mass displacement from Nagorno-Karabakh</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The government of Armenia integrates specific actions to address the gender-specific needs of the displaced people into a revised NAP, or other policy documents. ● Grassroots organisations are able to access flexible funds to provide urgent and long-term response to the displacement crisis. ● Psychosocial and mental health responses to the ongoing displacement crisis are gender-responsive and effectively implemented.
<p>Localisation of the WPS strategy in Armenia</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Local authorities are aware of the WPS agenda and the NAP, understand their obligations under it, and identify concrete actions and strategies to implement it in their context
<p>Challenging militarised narratives and hate speech within the Armenian society</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Journalists and the media understand the harmful effects of the militarised speech and narratives, in particular in the context of the new dynamics and tensions created by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the 2023 Azerbaijani military offensive in Nagorno Karabakh ● There is an increased trust and understanding between Armenian, Azeri and Ukrainian women



AZERBAIJAN

In Azerbaijan, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has also largely shaped the peacebuilding context. Azerbaijani CSOs and WROs have historically been at the frontline of responding to the needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled the contested region during the first Nagorno-Karabakh war in 1990s. It is estimated that there are currently some 659,000 IDPs in Azerbaijan, many of whom still face significant barriers to building their resilience and self-reliance.^{xliii}

Additionally, Azerbaijani CSOs have generally faced more significant barriers to their work than others in the region – as illustrated by the fact that it scored lowest across all indicators in the mapping conducted for this research. Azerbaijan’s average of 2 points out of 5 is well below that of the other countries, and of the regional average of 3.125. The below analysis provides more detailed insights into these specific challenges faced by Azerbaijani civil society.

Restrictive legal framework for civil society

Existing laws in Azerbaijan make it particularly challenging to register and run a CSO, and civil society has faced increasing backlash from the government.

According to Human Rights Watch, Azerbaijan’s civil society space has witnessed a deterioration in relations with the government and a state-led clampdown on freedoms and rights since at least 2012.^{xliii} What initially began as a strict response to protests aligning with the Arab Spring movement and a crackdown prior to 2013 Presidential elections, has become an ongoing suppression of civil society, including organisations working in the field of women, peace, and security.

The worst deterioration came in 2014, when changes in law made it much more difficult for civil society to obtain foreign funding. Research participants have shared that, as a result of the new laws, many CSOs found themselves having their accounts



frozen and losing secured funding. As a further consequence, thousands of skilled professionals have left the CSO sector.

“Financial contributions for the work of women’s NGOs are very low or non-existent, making these NGOs largely unsustainable.”

SOURCE: CSO INTERVIEW AZERBAIJAN

Troubled relationship with the government – exclusion and reprisals

Beyond the restrictive laws, the research has revealed a difficult relationship between the government of Azerbaijan and CSOs. On the one hand, research participants shared

that there are very few opportunities for dialogue with the government or influencing its decisions. Many of them have noted a “favouritism” in government-civil society relations, with the same, narrow group of organisations having their voices heard and their funding proposals approved. Consistent with this, a 2017 European Union-Council of Europe report concludes that “authorities treat their activities as confidential information and are often secretive about the agenda and decision-making process in government agencies.”^{xiv} This not only contributes to further shrinking the space for diverse civil society to operate in, but also fuels competition between CSOs.

The restrictions are made worse by reprisals and threats civil society actors have faced for their work. According to Frontline Defenders, the space for human rights defenders is increasingly shrinking, with the government using tactics like internet surveillance, rounding up of activists and imprisoning them, as well as judicial harassment of journalists, editors and bloggers.^{xiv}

Possible interventions in Azerbaijan

Based on the findings of the mapping, these are examples of initiatives that could be supported within the scope of the BREN project to address some of the key challenges faced by Azerbaijani WROs

Initiative/Action	Expected Outcomes
<p>Advocacy with the government of Azerbaijan to finalise, officially adopt and implement the draft NAP on WPS.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Azerbaijan's first NAP on WPS is officially adopted, and includes a clear results framework and dedicated budget. ● There are clear mechanisms for civil society participation in the implementation and monitoring of the progress on the implementation of Azerbaijan's 1st NAP on WPS
<p>Improve the protection of women peacebuilders and their work in Azerbaijan**</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The government of Azerbaijan agrees to review the restrictive laws that limit civil society space and restrict WROs' access to funding and decision-making. ● The government of Azerbaijan puts in place specific laws or policies to improve the protection of women and LGBTQI+ activists from violence and reprisals

**** Please note that given the particularly restricted civil society space in Azerbaijan, advocacy initiatives, in particular around relaxing the legal restrictions on CSOs and WROs face a host of challenges, including low receptiveness of the government and risks of reprisals.** Existing local initiatives that are committed to such advocacy should be supported; however, there is a risk that the lack of political will and limited scope for civil society action will prevent them from achieving the expected outcomes within the project's scope.



GEORGIA

Georgia's complex relationship with Russia defines the context in which Georgian CSOs and WROs operate. Moscow's support for two separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in early 1990s led to open conflict in 2008 and ended with the Russian military occupation of both territories and their subsequent recognition as independent states. As a result of full-scale land, air, and sea invasion in 2008, currently 20% of Georgia's internationally recognised territory is under Russian military occupation.^{xlvi}

The invasion also shaped the political dynamics within Georgia. In recent years, the country has mostly looked to the European Union for a political future, which has resulted in Association Agreement with European Union, signed in June 2014.

Georgia was also significantly affected by the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022. Large-scale anti-war protests began in Georgia in response to the invasion, and the work of CSOs in Georgia was also impacted, as organisations adapted to respond to the crisis. Many Georgian organisations mobilised support for Ukrainian activists and organisations responded to the humanitarian situation on the ground, working with refugees who arrived in Georgia. Available data suggests that, as of writing, there are around 27,000 refugees from

“Georgia has been struggling to break away fully from the Russian sphere of influence since it won independence from Soviet Union in 1991. It tries to establish itself as vibrant and forward-looking democracy in the face of a resurgent and imperially-minded Russia.”

SOURCE: IWPR GEORGIA COUNTRY REPORT

Ukraine in Georgia, as well as 35,000 people fleeing Russia and 15,000 from Belarus.^{xlvii} The influx of Russian refugees, in particular, increased significantly after the Russian government announced military mobilisation in September 2022.^{xlviii}

Disinformation, misinformation a hate-speech: key challenges for civil society in Georgia

The Russian invasion of Ukraine also deepened and aggravated the spread of disinformation and misinformation – often spread by or supported by Russia – in Georgia. In response to its pro-Western orientation, Russia has long targeted Georgia with disinformation on a wide range of topics, including the sources of the COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, but also broader efforts towards peacebuilding. The propaganda ridicules the values of democratic governance, respect to human rights and equality, and creates distrust amongst audiences. It has the effect of undermining the efforts of public and state diplomacy, as well as the work of peacebuilding CSOs and WROs in Georgia. This continuously exacerbates the already fragile situation in Georgia and in a wider South Caucasus region and requires new set of skills for more adaptive resilience from both state and non-state actors in the region.

The misinformation and disinformation is most pronounced in occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where Russia has solidified its political and cultural influence throughout the different stages of occupation since early 90s.

Left behind: struggles of the civil society organisations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions

Overall, civil society organisations in Georgia faced fewer restrictions and barriers than their counterparts in other parts of

the region – as reflected by Georgia holding the highest average score in the above table. However, this was not necessarily true for the organisations based in, or operating in, occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

According to the 2020 Civil Society Organisation Sustainability index, published by USAID, International Centre for Non-Profit Law and FHI360, “The CSOs working in Abkhazia and South Ossetia face additional barriers to accessing the funds. According to USAID, “[t]here is a significant gap between the organisational capacity of CSOs based in Georgia proper and those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia”, which can be accounted for primarily by a limited access to funding, since “[i]nternational donors provide very limited support to South Ossetian CSOs, while Abkhazia-based CSOs receive slightly more support.”^{xlix} The disparity is further aggravated by an increased level of threats, hate speech and even arbitrary arrests of activists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

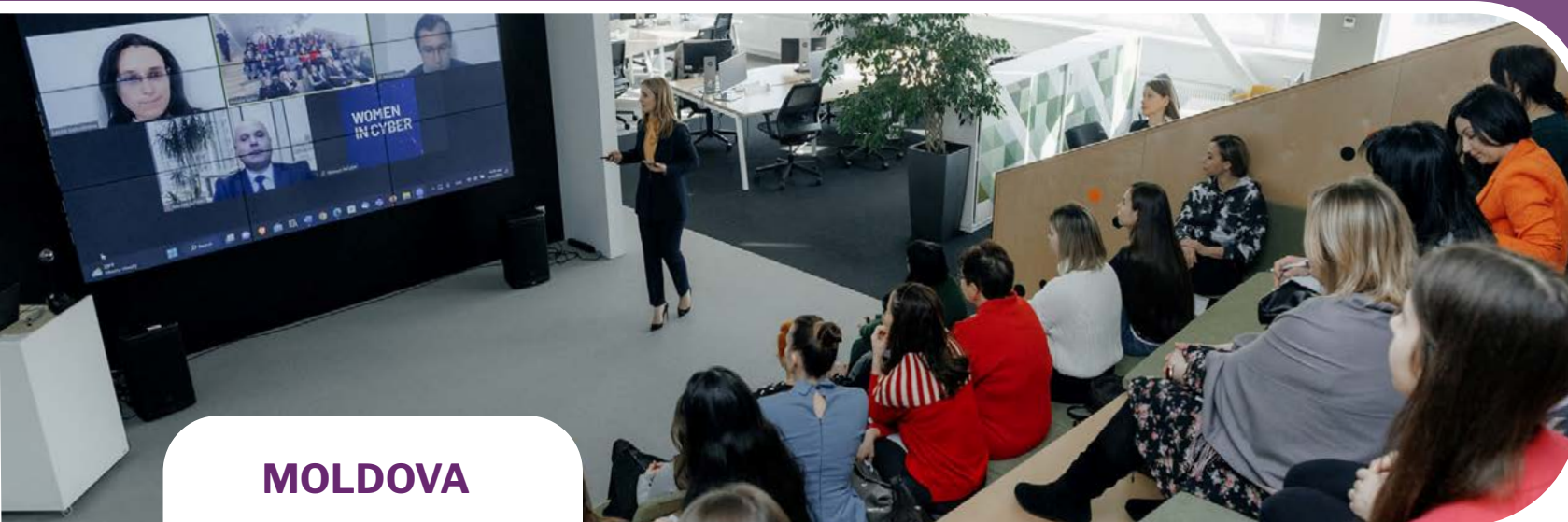
“The priority is for IDPs to be provided with decent conditions and at the same time start discussing non-political issues in order to get closer and restore trust.”

SOURCE: RESEARCH INTERVIEW GEORGIA

Examples of possible interventions in Georgia

Based on the findings of the mapping, these are examples of initiatives that could be supported within the scope of the BREN project to address some of the key challenges faced by Georgian WROs

Initiative/Action	Expected Outcomes
Consultations with CSOs based in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to better understand their needs, using a conflict-sensitive “do no harm” approach.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Concrete actions and mechanisms that can most effectively support civil society work and space in the two regions are identified and documented● Local grassroots CSOs and WROs in Abkhazia and South Ossetia can benefit the BREN project and funding mechanism
Engaging the government and the media to prevent and counter misinformation and disinformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The Georgian government puts in place appropriate accountability mechanisms to prosecute spreading of misinformation and disinformation online by public figures and media houses● Civil society are aware of the existing accountability mechanisms and apply them when faced with misinformation or hate speech



MOLDOVA

In Moldova, the peacebuilding work converges around the tensions over the Transnistria region, which is currently occupied by Russia. The region proclaimed its independence as the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic following a brief military conflict between March and July 1992, in which Russia supported the separatists' cause. A settlement process to end the conflict over the Transnistrian region has been ongoing, with various interruptions, since the 1992 ceasefire, and Russian troops have stationed in the region since.

It is an uneasy peace: Transnistria borders Ukraine, and many Moldovans fear that Russia might want to target their country should it succeed in its invasion of Ukraine. Transnistria has its own armed security forces and Soviet era weaponry; over 1,500 Russian troops are stationed in the region; and it gets free gas from Gazprom which it converts to electricity and sells to Moldova.¹

Moldova's uneasy relationship with Russia has been reflected in the country's attempts to tighten its ties with the West. Illustrating this, in March, Moldovan President Maia Sandu signed the official request to join the European Union, after

"In Transnistria, the overall context of civic engagement is extremely low... there is not a single woman who rules a district or city, these are all men without exception."

SOURCE: MOLDOVA RESEARCH INTERVIEW

expressing concern that it is not possible to feel secure in the region after seeing the Ukrainian invasion.ⁱⁱ

Moldova has also been significantly impacted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. According to the UNHCR, Moldova has received 792,605 Ukrainian refugees and 96,664 third country nationals since late February 2022. 109,226 are still within Moldova.ⁱⁱⁱ Dealing with the influx has put a strain on Moldova's already weakened economy. It also put an additional strain on CSOs and WROs, who have responded to the needs of those arriving from Ukraine. Moldovan civil society expects a larger influx of refugees, particularly if Russia takes control of Odessa, the Ukrainian port city that is the closest major centre to Moldova.

Misinformation, disinformation and lack of legal protection: challenges to the WPS agenda in Moldova, including the Transnistrian region

Although women and women's rights organisations face some challenges linked to the patriarchal culture across Moldova, these are more pronounced in Russia-occupied Transnistrian region.

A key barrier is the widespread disinformation, including smear campaigns against women activists and women active in politics. IWPR coverage of the national election of 2020 and





2016 documented the spread of fake news about the pro-Europe (then) candidate Maia Sandu. In just one day of coverage, an NGO working to combat fake news detected 130 online fake stories and manipulative posts, a vast majority of them targeting Sandu. The misinformation is even more widespread in the Transnistrian region, where the laws imposed by the *de facto* authorities significantly restrict freedom of speech.

The misinformation is to a significant extent supported and spread through Russian state media, including a deepfake video that showed President Sandu discussing alleged Moldovan military mobilization against Russia.¹¹¹¹ This type of disinformation is part of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy in Moldova: it fuels tensions between communities and bolsters militarised narratives and attitudes. It also makes the work of CSOs and WROs that counter such narratives more challenging.

It remains to be seen whether the conflict in Ukraine will increase distrust towards Kremlin sources amongst Moldovan audiences. One pattern which seems to have emerged, as noted in IWPR research within its [Countering Disinformation in Moldova](#) project, suggests that in some cases existing 'pro Kremlin' or 'pro EU' positions have been entrenched by the conflict, but a significant 'middle ground' of those who increasingly disapprove of Kremlin actions also emerged.

Examples of possible interventions in Moldova

Based on the findings of the mapping, these are examples of initiatives that could be supported within the scope of the BREN project to address some of the key challenges faced by Moldovan WROs

“For the third year we have been working to change the attitude, and prescribed a range of measures: risk assessment, redirecting officials, how to conduct an interview, how to prevent repeated victimization. Some services have been created in recent years... this does not mean the problem is solved.”

SOURCE: MOLDOVA RESEARCH INTERVIEW

Initiative/Action	Expected Outcomes
Establishing a national network of women peacebuilders from both sides of the Nistru river	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Women from Moldova and from the occupied Transnistria region exchange experiences, establish partnerships and build trust
Engaging local authorities in the Transnistrian region on issues of GBV	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Transnistrian <i>de facto</i> authorities are aware of the importance of preventing and responding to GBV and establish institutional mechanisms and/or policies to address it

CONCLUSION

As parts of the former Soviet Union, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova share some historical and cultural commonalities. Their geographical proximity also means that they are often affected by geopolitical shocks – such as the Russian invasion in Ukraine – in similar ways. However, the four contexts are also characterised by some important differences, in particular with regards to their political orientation in the past decades, and the situation of the CSOs and WROs within them. This report sought to summarise and analyse some of these differences.

Against the backdrop of the uniqueness of each individual context, some important commonalities emerge.

Across all four contexts, **patriarchal social norms** are strongly present and fuel both gender-based discrimination and violence and broader militaristic discourses, which – in turn – drive conflict and tensions within the societies. They also make it more difficult for WROs to advance their work to address **gendered impacts of conflict – including in particular GBV (both in public and in private) and mental health impacts.**

Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech directed towards peace activists and CSOs and WROs working on peacebuilding is also a shared feature of all four contexts. This has been often supported or encouraged by Russia and Russian

state media, especially in Georgia and Moldova, where disinformation has become part of Russian hybrid warfare tactics.

Strikingly, neither the patriarchal norms nor the disinformation and propaganda are tackled in the four countries' NAPs. This suggests either a lack of awareness of how those two issues are connected to the issues of peace and security, or a lack of political will to tackle them, due to their contentiousness. Either way, **support to civil society advocacy and other work to address these challenges** is a critical gap.

Based on in-depth qualitative research conducted in the four countries and evidence on best practices in supporting CSOs and WROs and advancing transformative peacebuilding the report identifies a number of concrete interventions and priority areas for action. These include:

- **Targeted and flexible funding for diverse CSOs and WROs** – including those led by minorities and those operating outside of capitals and large urban centres. The funding should be coupled with targeted technical support to build activists' and WROs' capacity to apply for, implement, and monitor future projects.
- **Support to combatting hate speech, misinformation and disinformation**, including by funding initiatives that engage journalists, as well as those that support minority groups – such a LGBTQI+ persons – to access justice when faced with abuse or harassment.
- **Invest in psychosocial support and mental health** as a critical part of peacebuilding, and a necessary first step towards building trust between communities and preventing further violence.
- **Support to adopting, implementing and localising transformative NAPs** – in line with the abundant global evidence that NAPs can lead to concrete solutions and actions, in particular at the local level.



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Transforming Peacebuilding in the Eastern Neighbourhood

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