

Annex 1B - Context Analysis (Youth)

This context analysis is focused specifically around issues pertaining to the Youth engagement under DANEP 2027 – 2031. The annex is complementary to the Annex 1 - Context analysis included in the overarching programme document for DANEP 2027 - 2031, which provides a broader overview of country contextual dynamics.

The Eastern Neighbourhood countries occupy a critical geopolitical space where the contest between democratic consolidation and authoritarian consolidation is being actively fought. Youth civil society sits at the heart of this contest. Moldova and Ukraine are advancing on their EU accession path, while the ongoing war plays a critical role in the youth sector through loss of human resources to mobilisation, migration, and sustained psychological pressure. While Armenia is articulating its European aspirations, Armenian society is heavily influenced by information warfare and political polarisation. In Belarus, authoritarianism has only become further entrenched following the most recent democratic protest movement in 2020, with many young Belarusians having since left the country. This divergence of political trajectories creates fundamentally different operating environments for youth organisations across the region, even as they share common structural challenges.

Youth-led civil society in the Eastern Neighbourhood functions as both a barometer and a determinant of democratic health. Where civic space is contracting, including in Azerbaijan, and Belarus, youth organisations are among the first to be targeted, their suppression a leading indicator of broader democratic regression. Where space remains open, including in contexts such as Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, they are demonstrating the capacity to drive policy change and sustain democratic culture under severe pressure.

Cross-Cutting Thematic and Structural Issues

Structural weakness and demographic erosion

Youth initiatives tend to be characterised by ad hoc volunteering, short-term project cycles, and weak governance structures. This makes them vulnerable to external shocks, whether political crackdowns, conflict, or funding disruptions, and limits their long-term institutional development. Emigration of young people also remains a cross-cutting challenge, draining the human capital on which youth organisations depend. In Ukraine, this is compounded by military mobilisation; in Belarus, by political exile; in other countries by labour migration to the EU. The UN has identified the Eastern Neighbourhood as among the fastest-depopulating regions globally, with emigration disproportionately concentrated among working-age youth.

Disinformation and information warfare

Fueled by targeted Russian campaigns and worsened by US funding cuts, disinformation threatens democracy and undermines public trust in institutions across the region. The 2024 Disinformation Resilience Index documents escalating disinformation pressure across Central and Eastern Europe since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Youth organisations are both primary targets of these campaigns and increasingly important frontline defenders against them.

Funding precarity.

One of the most urgent concerns is the financial vulnerability of civil society organisations. Recent cuts in external donor support have intensified fears about long-term sustainability and autonomy. This is compounded by a global funding squeeze partly driven by cuts to development assistance and shrinking civic space in parts of the region, making EU (and EU Member States) support proportionally more critical than ever.

Gender Equality and Women's Leadership

Gender inequality in civic and political participation affects all four countries, though its character differs. In Ukraine, the mass conscription of men has paradoxically created leadership openings for women in youth organisations, though this coexists with elevated protection risks for young women in displacement and conflict settings. In Moldova and Armenia, social norms restrict women's public roles, particularly in rural areas. In Belarus, women were at the forefront of the 2020 protests but have faced targeted and severe repression as a consequence.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

Mental health is a critical and often under-addressed dimension of youth sector programming in all four countries. In Ukraine, the UNDP 2024 study found that 25 percent of young people inside Ukraine cite mental health as a primary concern, rising to 61 percent for young Ukrainians abroad. Trauma, grief, and existential uncertainty are endemic. In Armenia, Karabakh-displaced youth face acute trauma and identity disruption. In Belarus, the psychological effects of systematic repression, marked by fear, self-censorship, and the trauma of forced exile, affect the mental health of young activists and their ability to sustain civic engagement.

Examples of Country Specific Issues

Ukraine

The ongoing war has depleted youth civil society of human resources through mobilisation and displacement, while generating new demands, underlining the need for psychological support, veteran reintegration, and wartime civic resilience. At the same time, civic engagement has surged: in Zaporizhzhia, for example, 3,727 consultations were delivered at the Checkpoint Rehabilitation Space, helping young veterans access psychological and legal support. Ukraine's youth sector has demonstrated remarkable adaptability, with youth-led organisations taking on quasi-public functions in areas where state capacity has been degraded by war.

Ukraine: key facts and figures

- As of 1 January 2022, approximately 9.97 million young people aged 14–35 lived in Ukraine, representing 24.3 percent of the total resident population (Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine)
- Young people aged 15–29 accounted for approximately 15 percent of the pre-war population, or around 6.3 million people (UNICEF, 2024)

- 40 percent of young people in Ukraine have been directly affected by the war: over 2 million became internally displaced persons; a further ~2 million fled abroad (Ministry of Youth and Sports / UNFPA)
- As of June 2024, 42 percent of young people in Ukraine cite health concerns as their primary worry; 31 percent cite lack of money; 26 percent cite lack of free time; 25 percent cite mental health (UNDP/Info Sapiens, 2024)
- For Ukrainian youth abroad, mental health issues have become the primary concern, cited by 61 percent (UNDP, 2024)
- Volunteer activity among young people increased from 30 percent in 2023 to 34 percent in 2024 — a sign of civic resilience despite the conflict (UNDP, 2024)
- Willingness to participate in community recovery declined from 72 percent in 2023 to 59 percent in 2024, reflecting war fatigue (UNDP, 2024)
- Breakdown of relationships with friends or family has risen from 18 percent to 27 percent among young people since the start of the full-scale invasion (UNDP, 2024)
- 82 percent of young people in Ukraine report suffering various losses — from income, to mental health deterioration, to strained relationships (UNDP, 2023)

Moldova

Moldova has undergone a notable consolidation of its European orientation. Following the opening of EU accession negotiations in June 2024, the anchoring of EU integration in the Moldovan Constitution through an October 2024 referendum, and the first-ever EU-Moldova Summit in Chişinău in July 2025, the country has committed with unusual depth to the European integration path. EU accession is both a policy framework and a civic aspiration, and youth organisations have a concrete and meaningful advocacy target around which to organise. However, Moldova faces serious external pressure. Russia has actively sought to destabilise the country through disinformation campaigns, election interference, and energy coercion. The unresolved Transnistria issue and Russian influence in Gagauzia (where pro-Russia sentiment remains strong) create geographic pockets of acute vulnerability. The National Youth Council of Moldova (CNTM), an umbrella body representing 36 youth organisations, has explicitly noted the challenge of growing youth engagement in Gagauzia and the north, where EU integration messaging has less resonance.

Moldova: key facts and figures

- Total population: 2,381,300 (1 January 2025, excluding Transnistria); 22.8 percent are young people aged between 14 and 34, equating to approximately 544,000 individuals (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025)
- 53.6 percent of Moldova's population lives in rural areas (2024 Census), making rural youth outreach a structural priority rather than a secondary consideration
- Youth unemployment: approx. 4.5 percent (ILO modelled, 2024); however, measured youth unemployment reached 12.8 percent for those aged 15–24 in Q1 2025 (ILO definition; Trading Economics)

- According to EU survey data, Only 25 percent of young Moldovans show an interest in politics, despite relatively high voter turnout, indicating a disconnect between formal political processes and civic identity
- Net migration rate of -24.4 per 1,000 population (2022) reflects persistent emigration pressure, which disproportionately affects working-age youth; Moldova has one of the highest emigration rates in Europe relative to its population
- The 2024 Census recorded significant increases in urban population (from 38.5 percent in 2014 to 46.4 percent in 2024), partly reflecting internal migration from rural areas, partly census methodology changes
- Moldova's National Youth Council (CNTM) unites 36 youth organisations and advocates across civic education, social inclusion, youth rights, and EU integration

Armenia

Following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, Armenia is undergoing a period of significant geopolitical reorientation, with the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, and the September 2023 Azerbaijani offensive leading to the complete displacement of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. The influx of over 115,000 displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 has created acute integration, social cohesion, and civic inclusion challenges. Many displaced young people settled in Kotayk, Ararat, and Armavir regions, areas with limited youth infrastructure and services.

Armenia's relationship with Russia is fraying rapidly following perceived Russian failure to fulfil its security commitments during the 2020 and 2023 conflicts. The country is diversifying its foreign partnerships towards the EU and the United States, while navigating domestic political tensions between pro-reform and pro-Russia constituencies. In March 2025, the Armenian Parliament adopted a new Law on Youth Policy, a significant legislative milestone that mandates the establishment of youth centers in all municipalities and provides a framework for structured youth participation.

Armenia: key facts and figures

- Population: approximately 2.78 million (2025 est.); youth unemployment: 26.3 percent (ILO modelled, 2024), one of the highest in the region and a chronic structural problem
- The 2018 Velvet Revolution was significantly driven by youth civic activism, establishing a precedent of youth agency in political transformation that shapes current youth civic identity
- National youth unemployment estimates vary significantly: UN data suggests a rate of 32.6 percent for some years, reflecting measurement differences and the severity of structural youth labour market exclusion
- Over 115,000 Armenians displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh arrived in Armenia in September 2023, the majority in a single 72-hour period, including a significant proportion of young people (Agora CE / ICHD data)

- 2023 marked the fifth consecutive year of declining youth unemployment, from 30.5 percent in 2021 to 26.3 percent in 2023, suggesting gradual improvement despite persistently high absolute levels (World Bank, 2025)
- New Law on Youth Policy adopted by Armenian Parliament in March 2025, mandating youth centres in all municipalities, the first such comprehensive youth policy framework in the country's history (UNICEF Armenia, 2025)

Belarus

Representing the most constrained operating environment in the region, a context of systematic state repression that has effectively destroyed domestic civil society, including youth organisations, following the fraudulent August 2020 presidential election and the mass protests it triggered. The scale of repression has no parallel in the region. According to Lawtrend monitoring, over 1,696 civil society organisations have been shut down since August 2020, of which 1,061 were forcibly liquidated by the government and 635 self-dissolved under threat. In 2023, at least 204 forced liquidations occurred; in 2024, at least 226 organisations have experienced the same fate. As of early 2025, approximately 1,400 political prisoners remain in Belarusian detention. The list of individuals and entities labelled as 'extremists' or 'terrorists', a designation that criminalises anyone interacting with them, stood at 3,819 individuals and 181 entities as of spring 2024. All opposition political parties have been liquidated; the 2024 parliamentary and 2025 presidential elections took place without independent candidates, observers, or genuine electoral competition. According to Freedom House, as many as 500,000 Belarusians, including most independent media workers and civil society actors, have emigrated since the crackdown.

Belarus: key facts and figures

- Over 1,696 civil society organisations shut down since August 2020; 1,061 forcibly liquidated, 635 self-dissolved under threat (Lawtrend / IFEX, 2024)
- At least 226 forced liquidations of CSOs in 2024 alone — showing the repression continues to intensify (BTI, 2026)
- Approximately 1,400 political prisoners as of early 2025; over 5,000 politically-motivated criminal convictions since August 2020 (Viasna)
- As many as 500,000 Belarusians — including most independent media and civil society workers — have emigrated since the crackdown began (Freedom House, 2024)
- 3,819 individuals and 181 entities designated 'extremist' or 'terrorist' as of spring 2024, criminalising interaction with them (SCEEUS, 2024)
- Youth unemployment: approximately 10.1 percent (ILO modelled, 2024) — the headline figure understates youth marginalisation given the absence of independent labour market data
- Internet penetration: 89.5 percent (DataReportal, January 2024) — one of the highest in Central and Eastern Europe, making digital civic space critically important for Belarusian youth in exile and inside
- Nearly all independent media declared 'extremist organisations'; at least 45 journalists imprisoned as of end-2024 (Belarusian Association of Journalists)