

Annex 1C - Context Analysis (Culture)

This context analysis is focused specifically around issues pertaining to the Culture 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.

Across the Eastern Neighbourhood region, the cultural sector is simultaneously an arena of democratic struggle and a target of authoritarian pressure. The resilience of cultural actors, including through their capacity to sustain independent creative work, build civic communities, and contest dominant narratives is directly tied to the health of democratic life. Strengthening the sector requires not only project-based support but systemic investment in sustainability, safety, inclusion, and cross-border solidarity.

The cultural sector plays a critical role in relation to prospects towards European integration. While political and economic dimensions of EU accession processes receive significant attention, social dimensions shaped through culture, arts, education, and civil society are equally fundamental. People-to-people relations built through cultural exchange create the affective bonds, mutual recognition, and shared references that make political integration meaningful and sustainable.

Cultural and creative sectors serve as incubators of civic identity, critical thinking, and social cohesion in societies undergoing political transitions or facing authoritarian pressure. Where formal democratic institutions are weakened, cultural spaces such as theatres, independent media, arts festivals, literary communities, and heritage institutions often become the primary arenas where citizens can articulate shared values, contest dominant narratives, and imagine alternative futures. Despite its critical importance, the cultural sector across the region faces persistent structural weaknesses. The sector is fragmented by competition for limited grant funding, an absence of long-term joint strategies, and a lack of coordination across national and sub-regional levels. This fragmentation undermines the collective impact of cultural actors and reduces their ability to respond effectively to shared challenges.

Cross-cutting Thematic and Structural Issues

Russian Influence and Interference as a Structural Challenge Across the Region

Russian interference in the cultural and information environment of Eastern Neighbourhood countries is not incidental but systematic, operating across all six countries through adapted strategies. Russian disinformation operations in the South Caucasus and Moldova have pursued the dual aim of undermining support for Ukraine while dividing societies from within and gaining local influence. Beyond information warfare, Russia operates a sustained cultural diplomacy apparatus. Russia's soft power initiatives, including cultural exchanges, language education, and media outreach, are being leveraged to maintain influence across the South Caucasus, with Moscow actively pursuing negotiations to reopen its cultural presence in Azerbaijan following the closure of the Russian House in Baku in February 2025.

Fragmentation and Sustainability of the Cultural Sector

The structural weaknesses of the cultural sector in Eastern Neighbourhood countries compound the political pressures it faces. Public cultural institutions across the region are numerous but chronically underfunded, and many operate under mandates inherited from Soviet-era models that prioritise prestige over community engagement. Independent cultural organisations are largely dependent on international grant funding, a model that generates competition rather than solidarity, and creates organisations oriented toward donor priorities rather than community needs. This fragmentation limits the sector's capacity to act as a coherent force for social cohesion. The EU Eastern Partnership has sought to address this, reinforcing civil society and fostering people-to-people ties through cultural exchanges and mobility programmes, though the geopolitical environment has considerably complicated this work.

Shrinking Civic and Cultural Space

The convergence of authoritarianism, disinformation, and political fragmentation has produced a consistent pattern of shrinking space for independent cultural expression across the region. According to CIVICUS (2024), civic space in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries is classified as narrowed in Armenia and Moldova, obstructed in Georgia and Ukraine, and closed in Azerbaijan and Belarus. This classification captures a spectrum of constraints from bureaucratic obstruction and funding pressure to outright criminalisation, all of which point to serious consequences for the independence and vitality of cultural life.

Gender Inequality and the Cultural Sector

Gender inequality and the marginalisation of LGBTQI+ communities represent a cross-cutting challenge that intersects with the wider dynamics of democratic backsliding. Across the four countries, LGBT organisations and activists face unprecedented threats including shrinking civic space, repressive laws, rising violence, and targeted disinformation campaigns. Research documents a consistent correlation between rising authoritarianism and crackdowns on LGBTQI+ rights and protections, meaning that as democratic conditions deteriorate, the safety and inclusion of these communities deteriorates with them.

Examples of Country Specific Dynamics

Ukraine

Ukraine represents the most acute and extreme situation in the region, where the cultural sector faces simultaneous existential pressures: physical destruction of heritage, loss of human capital, and a deliberate Russian strategy of cultural erasure. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is not only a military aggression but a calculated assault on the nation's cultural identity and heritage. Beyond territorial ambitions, it reveals a deliberate strategy of cultural suppression implemented through direct attacks on cultural sites, the persecution of artists, forced Russification of occupied territories (and populations therein), and sophisticated disinformation campaigns aimed at rewriting history to deny a distinct Ukrainian identity. The Council of Europe has declared that Russia's destruction of Ukrainian cultural heritage is consistent with genocidal intent, noting that the targeting and looting of cultural sites appears to reflect a systematic policy aimed at erasing Ukraine's historical and cultural identity, consistent with genocidal intent. UN experts have

documented more than 240 cultural properties damaged, with other assessments citing over 1,000 incidents involving cultural infrastructure and heritage sites, and expressing deep concern that this destruction restricts Ukrainians' human right to access and enjoy cultural heritage, with long-lasting effects that will undermine prospects for peaceful coexistence and post-war recovery.

Despite this, Ukraine's cultural sector has demonstrated extraordinary resilience. The Ukrainian Cultural Foundation has established six priorities for 2025, including creating cultural products that reflect wartime challenges and consolidate society, developing inclusive and trauma-aware cultural practices for mental recovery, and ensuring barrier-free access to cultural practices for everyone. UNESCO's Lviv Culture Hub has since its 2025 opening hosted over 170 civil society events reaching more than 4,500 participants, and conducted 13 training sessions for over 850 heritage professionals, positioning it as a space for mobilising responses toward peacebuilding and recovery. However, there is a significant gap between ambition and concrete international action. Culture is often overlooked in international discussions on Ukraine's post-war recovery, and the 2024 Ukraine Recovery Conference in Berlin failed to articulate an agenda for recovery of the culture sector at large. The 2024 Vilnius Call for Action on the Recovery of the Culture Sector of Ukraine and the 2025 declaration from the 'cultural Ramstein' conference in Uzhhorod, while reaffirming the EU's commitment, have yet to be implemented in concrete action.

Moldova

Moldova occupies a uniquely exposed position among the Eastern Neighbourhood countries, a small, economically vulnerable country with deep historical ties to Russia, a separatist region (Transnistria) under de facto Russian control, and a government pursuing an increasingly clear Euro-Atlantic orientation. For the cultural and civil society sector, this geopolitical tension translates into an intense and ongoing information environment battle.

Since Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, attempts to destabilise Moldova have intensified, posing not only a threat to Moldova's own security and sovereignty but also to the Eastern Partnership region and the EU's external borders. Both the 2024 presidential elections and constitutional referendum on EU membership were overshadowed by an unprecedented assault on the country's democracy, with Russia's proxies deploying vote-buying schemes, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns via media and social platforms.

The 2024 constitutional referendum confirmed majority support among Moldovan citizens for EU membership, though the process faced a significant Russian hybrid campaign employing strategic exploitation of social media, AI-generated content, leaked fake documents, intimidation, illicit financing of political actors, and vote-buying. Cultural and media actors have become frontline responders to this challenge. For example, during the country's 2024 and 2025 elections, civil society and media organisations established a joint platform to coordinate counter-disinformation efforts, an initiative which was subsequently viewed as being critical to contributing to the victories of pro-European candidates.

Structurally, Moldova's underdeveloped media market makes it particularly susceptible to Russian exploitation, with Gagauzia, Balti, and Transnistria identified as areas where separatist

tendencies, ideological indoctrination, and distortion of history remain ongoing challenges. This structural vulnerability means that cultural sector investment in media literacy, independent cultural production, and community-based cultural institutions is directly relevant to national resilience and democratic consolidation.

Armenia

Armenia presents a distinct and rapidly evolving dynamic. Following the 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan's 2023 military offensive that dissolved the enclave entirely, Armenia has experienced a profound reorientation away from Russia and toward the EU. However, this pivot has occurred in a context of deep internal polarisation and continued exposure to Russian interference. The Armenian government is aware of Moscow's readiness to influence elections, and the current situation, where nationalist forces are accusing the incumbent government of national betrayal, appears tailor-made for Russian interference strategies that capitalise on moments of national polarisation, using AI and social media. Russia has also sought to champion traditional values and portray itself as a bulwark against Western liberalism, exploiting cultural and religious tensions.

In addition, Russia continues to pursue cultural diplomacy in Armenia through soft power initiatives including cultural exchanges, language education, and media outreach. In April 2025, Russia's Special Representative for International Cultural Cooperation stated that Moscow remains open to expanding cultural ties with Yerevan, including in film, theatre, performing arts, and art education. This continued Russian cultural engagement represents a strategic instrument to maintain influence, counteracting Armenia's EU integration trajectory and complicating the independent development of its cultural sector. Despite these pressures, Armenian civil society has shown notable strength. Armenia registered democratic progress after the 2018 Velvet Revolution, with Freedom House freedom scores rising considerably, though more recent assessments note a slight decline reflecting executive consolidation of power and trends of central authorities overreaching.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan presents the starkest case of civic and cultural space closure among the focus countries not in a state of active conflict. The Aliyev government exercises near-total control over public cultural life, and independent cultural and civil society actors face systematic legal, financial, and physical repression.

For cultural actors, Azerbaijan's environment requires operating under constant surveillance or in effective exile. The Azerbaijani state promotes a tightly controlled official cultural narrative centred on national identity, Azerbaijani territorial integrity, and anti-Armenian sentiment, while suppressing artistic and intellectual work that challenges this narrative or engages with minority rights, historical memory, or political dissent. Independent theatre, documentary film, literary communities, and heritage professionals working outside state structures do so at significant personal and institutional risk. The government's blocking of EU civil society grant funding is particularly damaging, as it eliminates one of the primary alternative funding channels available to independent cultural actors in other neighbourhood countries.