



SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE & MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

IN EASTERN EUROPE
AND CENTRAL ASIA
2025



This publication was published by the Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA), a non-profit, membership-based public organisation that unites and supports more than 300 Central and Eastern European and Central Asian (CEECA) harm reduction activists and organisations to ensure the rights and freedoms, health and well-being of people who use psychoactive substances. For more information, visit the website: <https://harmreductioneurasia.org/>

This publication was prepared by partners of the Rise & Decriminalize movement that includes the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional community networks EHRA (Eurasian Harm Reduction Association), ECOM (Eurasian Coalition for Health, Rights and Sexual Diversity), EWNA (Eurasian Women's Network on AIDS) and SWAN (Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network), who have a longstanding partnership and solidarity that has made this work possible.

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- The project, 'RESILIENT Communities & Securing Civic Space for HIV Response in EECA' (RESILIENT), implemented with the financial support of the Elton John AIDS Foundation. The project aims to build resilience and strengthen advocacy of community-led groups/organisations in the EECA region to prevent and mitigate regulatory challenges that threaten the rights of people living with HIV (PLHIV) and key populations (KPs) – people who use drugs, LGBTQI+, and sex workers. It focuses on countering restrictive laws (such as, 'foreign agent' and 'anti-LGBT propaganda') that shrink civic space and hinder community-led, including HIV, responses. The project is implemented by EHRA, ECOM, EWNA and SWAN.

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Executive summary

The analysis of legal frameworks, enforcement practices and documented incidents in 2025 reveals a region in which civic space across Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) remains fragile, uneven and increasingly shaped by political and regulatory pressures. These pressures disproportionately affect civil society organisations led by and working with people living with HIV (PLHIV) and key populations (gay men and other men who have sex with men, sex workers, transgender people, people who inject drugs, and people in prisons and other closed settings)¹. While all ten EECA countries covered by the study (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan) formally guarantee fundamental freedoms, their practical enjoyment is frequently undermined by restrictive legislation, administrative barriers, selective enforcement and inconsistent protection for marginalised communities. These dynamics have direct and tangible consequences for the sustainability, reach and effectiveness of community-led HIV and tuberculosis (TB) responses.

The report examines developments affecting community-led HIV and TB responses in the ten EECA countries in 2024-2025. Drawing on structured inputs from national focal points (recruited within the RESILIENT project), documented case examples and verified legal references, the analysis focuses on four interrelated dimensions of civic space: freedom of association; freedom of peaceful assembly; freedom of expression and access to information; and criminalisation of key populations and protection from reprisal.

Key findings

The findings point to a converging regional pattern of civic space restriction, manifested through different legal, political and administrative mechanisms across countries.

- **Freedom of association** has been increasingly affected by foreign-agent or foreign-influence frameworks, most notably in Georgia and through the introduction of similar legislation in Kyrgyzstan, alongside long-standing restrictive practices in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Even in countries without formally designated foreign-agent laws, opaque registration procedures, constraints related to foreign funding, selective enforcement of administrative rules and fears of reprisal continue to limit the operational security and independence of organisations working with PLHIV and key populations.

¹ Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines. Geneva: Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS; 2024. https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/2024-terminology-guidelines_en.pdf

- **Freedom of peaceful assembly** remains formally protected in most national legal frameworks but is undermined in practice by violence from non-state actors, uneven police protection and insufficient accountability. Case examples from Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine illustrate how attacks against activists – particularly those associated with LGBTQI+ communities – discourage public participation, reinforce fear and contribute to self-censorship. In several Central Asian contexts, assemblies related to sensitive issues are avoided altogether due to anticipated risks, effectively narrowing civic space without the need for explicit bans.
- **Freedom of expression and access to information** are increasingly constrained through a combination of “anti-drug propaganda” provisions, morality- or family-values-based restrictions targeting sexual orientation and gender identity, and expanding controls over independent education and online activities. Vague legal definitions enable discretionary and selective enforcement, fostering widespread self-censorship among organisations working on harm reduction, sexuality, gender equality and human rights – precisely the areas essential to effective HIV and TB responses.
- **Criminalisation of key populations and insufficient or absent protection from reprisal** remains a structural barrier to health, safety and participation across the region. Uzbekistan continues to criminalise consensual same-sex relations between men and has applied this provision to prosecute transgender women during the reporting period. Punitive drug control mechanisms – including drug registries with lasting civil rights consequences in countries such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – further deter engagement with health and harm reduction services. Across the region, incidents of violence, intimidation and reprisal against marginalised groups and activists are insufficiently addressed, reinforcing invisibility, distrust in institutions and reduced engagement with services.

The study revealed a pattern of adaptation and risk management by civil society across countries. Organisations increasingly adjust their strategies to mitigate risk – for example, by avoiding public events, limiting their online presence, modifying documentation practices or reducing engagement with authorities. While such adaptations may enable short-term survival, they also signal a contraction of meaningful civic participation and weaken community-led responses to HIV and TB over time.

At the same time, community-led organisations (CLOs) across the region have developed proactive strategies to sustain advocacy and accountability under shrinking civic

The findings point to a converging regional pattern of civic space restriction, manifested through different legal, political and administrative mechanisms across countries. Organisations increasingly adjust their strategies to mitigate risk – for example, by avoiding public events, limiting online presence, modifying documentation practices or reducing engagement with authorities. While such adaptations may enable short-term survival, they also signal a contraction of meaningful civic participation and weaken community-led responses to HIV and TB over time.

space. These include expanded community-led monitoring of rights violations and service barriers; coordinated engagement with international human rights mechanisms; coalition building across key population and human rights movements; strategic litigation to challenge restrictive laws and administrative decisions; and, where space allows, public mobilisation against repressive measures. Together, these approaches demonstrate that while civic space is narrowing, communities continue to assert rights, influence policy processes and protect access to HIV and TB services through adaptive and evidence-based advocacy.

Overview of recommendations

In response to these findings, the report calls for coordinated and sustained action by multiple stakeholders.

- For **national governments**, the analysis underscores the importance of strengthening protection of fundamental freedoms, ensuring legal certainty and proportionality in regulatory frameworks, guaranteeing the safety of marginalised communities during public events, and removing punitive legal and administrative barriers that undermine access to health services. Particular emphasis is placed on protecting the independence of civil society organisations (CSOs) and community-led organisations (CLOs) working with PLHIV and key populations, and on recognising their specific vulnerabilities within restrictive or polarised environments.
- For **international and regional partners, including donors**, the findings highlight the need for sustained and flexible support for community-led responses, adaptation of funding modalities to restrictive operating contexts, and systematic integration of civic space considerations into HIV and TB programming. Support for legal reform, institutional accountability, and digital security is identified as critical to sustaining services and advocacy.
- For **civil society and community-led organisations**, the report emphasises the value of strengthening cross-movement alliances where space allows; preserving and rebuilding coordination and trust in restrictive environments; enhancing documentation of rights violations; investing in safety and digital protection; and pursuing strategic legal action where feasible, while maintaining constructive engagement with authorities to preserve space for service delivery. It further highlights the importance of protecting continuity of community-led services where explicit advocacy is constrained, and of reframing community empowerment strategies to sustain resilience, solidarity and participation under shrinking civic space.

Taken together, these actions are essential to ensuring that civic space functions as an enabling environment rather than as a barrier to effective, rights-based HIV and TB responses in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Acronyms and abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
AM	Armenia
AZ	Azerbaijan
BE	Belarus
CEECA	Central and Eastern European and Central Asian
CLO	Community-Led Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
ECOM	Eurasian Coalition on Health, Rights, Gender and Sexual Diversity
EECA	Eastern European and Central Asian
	Eurasian Harm Reduction Association
EWNA	Eurasian Women's Network on AIDS
GE	Georgia
Global Fund	The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
KP	Key Population
KY	Kyrgyzstan
KZ	Kazakhstan

LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and other sexual and gender diverse people
MD	Moldova
BE	Belarus
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PLHIV	People Living with HIV
PUD	People who Use Drugs
RCF	Robert Carr Foundation
SW	Sex Worker
SWAN	Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network
TB	Tuberculosis
TJ	Tajikistan
UA	Ukraine
UZ	Uzbekistan
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
WHO	World Health Organization

Glossary of terms

Access to information

The right of every person to seek, receive and impart information held by public authorities. It is a key element of freedom of expression and is essential for transparent governance, accountability, and public participation. Under international human rights law, states have a positive obligation to proactively make information of public interest available and to ensure accessible procedures for requesting and obtaining it. The right to access information may be subject to limitations in accordance with the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality².

Access to justice

The ability of individuals and groups to obtain a fair, effective and timely remedy through formal or informal justice systems for violations of rights, including those related to health, discrimination or violence. Access to justice requires the existence of competent, independent, and impartial institutions, affordable procedures, legal aid, and protection for victims and witnesses³.

Civic space

Is the environment that allows people and groups to participate in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of their societies. It is essentially the space where civil society operates, enabling individuals and groups to access information, express their views, and engage in dialogue with the government and other actors. A healthy civic space is crucial for a functioning democracy, allowing citizens to organise, advocate for change, and participate in public life without fear of reprisal⁴.

Civil society organisation (CSO)

or non-governmental organisation (NGO) is any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organised on a local, national, regional or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, CSOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens'

2 United Nations. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. New York. General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI), United Nations, 16 December 1966, Article 19. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>; United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures. The Right of Access to Information (fact sheet) Geneva; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), undated. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Expression/Factsheet_5.pdf.

3 United Nations. Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power. New York. General Assembly resolution 40/34, United Nations, 29 November 1985. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-basic-principles-justice-victims-crime-and-abuse>; Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders. Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers. Havana; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 7 September 1990.

4 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). United Nations Guidance Note. Protection and Promotion of Civic Space. Geneva. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), September 2020. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/CivicSpace/UN_Guidance_Note.pdf.

concerns to governments, monitor policies, and encourage political participation at the community level. CSOs provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms and help monitor and implement international agreements, including Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals. Typically, they are organised around specific issues, such as the UN pillars of peace and security, human rights, and development⁵.

Community-led organisation (CLO)

In the context of HIV, community-led HIV organisations, groups and networks, whether formally or informally organised, are entities for which the majority of governance, leadership, staff, spokespeople, membership and volunteers reflect and represent the experiences, perspectives and voices of their constituencies and who have transparent mechanisms of accountability to their constituencies. Community-led organisations, groups and networks engaged in the AIDS response are self-determining and autonomous, and not influenced by government, commercial or donor agendas. Not all community-based organisations are community-led. Community-led organisations is an umbrella term that includes different types of organisations such as those led by members of key populations, women and youth⁶.

Criminalization

The process by which certain behaviours, identities or conditions are defined as crimes. International human-rights standards stipulate that criminalisation must meet principles of legality, necessity and proportionality, and must not be discriminatory. The criminalisation of HIV non-disclosure, exposure and transmission, as well as of behaviours linked to key populations – such as drug use and possession for personal use, sex work, or same-sex relations – often violates rights to health, privacy and equality. It also undermines an effective HIV response because fear of prosecution can dissuade people from seeking testing and treatment, and deters people living with or at risk of HIV from talking openly to their medical providers, disclosing their HIV status or using available prevention or treatment services⁷.

Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA)

While there are different definitions of the region, this report follows the UNAIDS definition which includes: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan⁸.

5 United Nations. Civil Society. New York; United Nations, undated. <https://www.un.org/en/civil-society/page/about-us>

6 Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), 2024, Ibid.

7 Criminalization (Human Rights Fact Sheet Series) in Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), 2024, op.cit.; https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/01-hiv-human-rights-factsheet-criminalization_en.pdf

8 Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). Countries. Eastern Europe and central Asia. Geneva; UNAIDS, undated. <https://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/easterneuropeandcentralasia>

Foreign Agent Law

refers to the laws that mirror the Russian Federation Federal Law of July 20, 2012, No. 121-FZ, 'On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Regulation of Activities of Non-commercial Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent'⁹, and impose restriction on the organisations receiving foreign funding, as well as similar legislation in other countries following the same approach.

Freedom of Association

The right of all individuals and groups to form, join and participate in associations – such as non-governmental organisations, trade unions, networks and community groups – without undue interference. This includes the right to seek, receive and use resources, including foreign funding, for lawful purposes¹⁰.

Freedom of Expression

The right to hold opinions and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers. It includes political, artistic and scientific expression, and is essential for public debate, accountability and community advocacy. Restrictions are permissible only if they are lawful, necessary and proportionate¹¹.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The right of individuals and groups to gather in public or private spaces for collective expression, including demonstrations, meetings, vigils and other peaceful events. States must facilitate assemblies, protect participants from violence and refrain from unjustified restrictions or excessive use of force¹².

Key populations

UNAIDS considers gay men and other men who have sex with men, sex workers, transgender people, people who inject drugs, and people in prisons and other closed settings as the five main key

9 О внесении изменений в отдельные законодательные акты Российской Федерации в части регулирования деятельности некоммерческих организаций, выполняющих функции иностранного агента [On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Regulation of Non-Profit Organisations Performing the Functions of Foreign Agents] (in Russian). Moscow; Официальное опубликование правовых актов [Official publication of legal acts], 20 July 2012. <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201207230003>

10 United Nations. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. New York; General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI), Article 22, 16 December 1966. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>; United Nations. The rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. New York; UN Human Rights Council Resolution 15/21, 6 October 2010. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/RES/15/21>

11 Article 19, United Nations, 1966. Ibid.; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Freedom of expression and opinion. Geneva; OHCHR, undated. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/topic/freedom-expression-and-opinion>

12 Article 21, United Nations, 1966. Op.cit.; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). General Comment No. 37 on Article 21 (Right of peaceful assembly). Geneva; OHCHR, 17 September 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-37-article-21-right-peaceful>

populations that are particularly vulnerable to HIV and frequently lack adequate access to services. These populations often experience stigma and discrimination, including in the form of laws and policies, all of which act to reduce access to services and increase risk of acquiring HIV. They are among the groups most likely to be exposed to HIV. Their engagement is critical to a successful HIV response everywhere – they are key to the epidemic and key to the response¹³.

Protection from Reprisal

The obligation of states to protect individuals and organisations from retaliation, intimidation, violence or legal action arising from their participation in civic life, engagement with international mechanisms or exercise of freedoms of expression, association and assembly. Effective protection includes preventive measures, investigation and accountability. Protection from reprisal is fundamental to ensuring civic participation and accountability¹⁴.

13 Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), 2024, Op.cit.

14 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Good practices for preventing and addressing reprisals. Geneva; OHCHR, undated. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/reprisals/good-practices-preventing-and-addressing-reprisals>; United Nations. Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General. UN Human Rights Council Resolution 12/2. Geneva; United Nations, 12 October 2009. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/RES/12/2>

Introduction

Across Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA), civil society organizations (CSOs) and community-led organizations (CLOs) have long played a critical role in delivering HIV and TB services to people living with HIV (PLHIV) and key populations (KPs), including people who use drugs, sex workers, LGBTQI+ communities, migrants and people in detention. Community-led approaches – peer outreach, harm reduction, rights-based advocacy and community monitoring – have been repeatedly recognised by international health and human-rights bodies as essential to reaching populations underserved by formal health systems¹⁵.

At the same time, this work increasingly unfolds within a global context of shrinking civic space. Independent monitoring initiatives, notably the CIVICUS Monitor, document a sustained worldwide contraction of freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression¹⁶. As of 2025, only a minority of countries globally are classified as having 'open' civic space, while most are rated as narrowed, obstructed, repressed or closed, placing the majority of the world's population under restricted civic conditions¹⁷.

These global trends are reflected with particular intensity across Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. CIVICUS assessments of the Europe and Central Asia region show a predominantly constrained civic space environment, with a significant number of countries classified as narrowed, obstructed, repressed or closed¹⁸. Several EECA countries fall within the most restrictive categories, while others have experienced democratic backsliding after previously more open civic environments¹⁹. Since approximately 2019–2020, monitoring systems have recorded a steady pattern of deterioration across the region,

CIVICUS assessments of the European and Central Asian region show a predominantly constrained civic-space environment, with a significant number of countries classified as narrowed, obstructed, repressed or closed. Since approximately 2019–2020, monitoring systems have recorded a steady pattern of deterioration across the region, including new legal restrictions on civil society, increased pressure on independent media, and intensified responses to public protest and advocacy.

15 CIVICUS Monitor. *People Power Under Attack 2025: Global Findings*. Johannesburg; CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, 2025. <https://civicusmonitor.contentfiles.net/media/documents/GlobalFindings2025.EN.pdf>

16 CIVICUS Monitor *Tracking Civic Space*. <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

17 CIVICUS Monitor 2025, *ibid.*

18 CIVICUS Monitor 2025, *Op.cit.*

19 CIVICUS Monitor 2025, *Op.cit.*; International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR). *CIVICUS Monitor: The Silencing of Critical Voices Deepens in Central Asia*. Brussels; IPHR, 9 December 2025. <https://iphronline.org/articles/civicus-monitor-the-silencing-of-critical-voices-deepens-in-central-asia/>

including new legal restrictions on civil society, increased pressure on independent media, and intensified responses to public protest and advocacy²⁰.

Within the EECA region specifically, these pressures have increasingly taken legal and regulatory form, including foreign-agent or foreign-influence frameworks; restrictive NGO registration and reporting requirements; limitations on access to foreign funding; expanded public order and morality provisions; and laws regulating information related to drug use, sexuality or gender identity. Regional human rights organisations have also documented the use of selective enforcement, administrative inspections and informal pressure as tools to constrain independent civil society activity²¹.

Parallel to these governance trends, CSOs and CLOs working on HIV and TB have faced structural and financial pressures. International funding for HIV responses in middle-income countries has been declining or stagnating for several years, as donors increasingly shift priorities or transition funding responsibilities to national governments. At the same time, domestic financing has not consistently expanded to fill these gaps. In several middle-income countries, limited political willingness and fiscal prioritisation have constrained the replacement of external support for programmes serving key populations – particularly community-led prevention, harm reduction, gender- and rights-based services, and advocacy²².

Taken together, these developments have shaped a challenging context for organisations led by and working with PLHIV and KPs. Even where legal frameworks formally recognise fundamental freedoms, the combination of regulatory uncertainty, political pressure, social stigma and funding instability has affected the ability of CSOs and CLOs to operate sustainably, engage openly in advocacy and maintain trust with the communities they serve.

About this report

This report is the outcome of an extensive regional data collection effort, conducted in 2025 and described in detail in the 'Methodology of Data Collection' section below. Drawing on structured inputs from ten countries, the report examines the civic space and legal environment context affecting community-led HIV and TB responses in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA).

- 20 CIVICUS Monitor 2025, Op.cit.; CIVICUS Monitor. In Numbers. Global Summary: Civic Space Dynamics. Johannesburg; CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, 2025. https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2025/innumbers/; CIVICUS Monitor. Rights Reversed: A Downward Shift in Civic Space (2019-2023). Johannesburg; CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, 2024. <https://monitor.civicus.org/rights-reversed-2019-to-2023/>; CIVICUS Monitor. Europe and Central Asia overview. Johannesburg; CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, undated. <https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings/europeandcentralasia/>
- 21 CIVICUS Monitor. Europe and Central Asia Civic Space Findings. Johannesburg; CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, 2024. https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2024/europeandcentralasia/; Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). World AIDS Day report 2025. Overcoming disruption: Transforming the AIDS response. Geneva; Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2025. http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/2025-WAD-report_en.pdf
- 22 The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. The Global Fund Sustainability, Transition and Co-financing Policy. Geneva; The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, 2024. https://www.theglobalfund.org/media/14383/core_sustainability-transition-cofinancing_policy_en.pdf; Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). Progress Update on Sustainability in the HIV Response. Geneva; UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board, 2025. https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/PCB57_Sustainability_Update_EN_0.pdf; Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). The path that ends AIDS: Global AIDS Update 2023. Geneva; Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), 2023. <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2023/global-aids-update-2023>; Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA). Taking stock of budget advocacy efforts in Eastern Europe, South-Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Vilnius; EHRA, 2021. <https://api.harmreductioneurasia.org/0a3e325c-6ac8-4e8d-b460-6366264df581.pdf>

Grounded in international human rights standards, the analysis focuses on four interrelated dimensions that are central to the functioning of civil society and the sustainability of community-led responses: freedom of association; freedom of peaceful assembly; freedom of expression and access to information; and the criminalisation of key populations and protection from reprisal.

The report is intended for policymakers, international and regional organisations, donors, human rights mechanisms, and civil society and community-led networks working in the fields of HIV, TB, harm reduction, gender equality and human rights. It aims to support informed policy dialogue and evidence-based advocacy by situating developments observed during 2024-2025 within a clearly documented regional and global context.

The report presents key regional trends and findings across the four civic space dimensions, supported by comparative tables and illustrative country examples. It then synthesises these findings in dedicated conclusions, before outlining targeted and actionable recommendations for national governments, international and regional partners, and civil society and community-led organisations.

Throughout the report, summary tables are used to provide comparative snapshots across countries. 'YES', 'NO', and 'N/A' responses reflect information reported through the monitoring instrument for the relevant period and should be interpreted in context, as a 'YES' may indicate either the presence of a restrictive measure or the existence of a protection, depending on the specific question. In some instances, comments are provided to explain the logic behind choosing a 'YES' or 'NO' answer, with colour-coding highlighting general patterns and tendencies rather than definitive legal assessments and should be read alongside the accompanying narrative analysis.

It is envisaged that similar assessments and reports will be produced on an annual basis, enabling regular monitoring, comparison over time, and strengthened accountability.

Methodology of data collection

The 'Civic Space Monitoring in EECA Instrument' (developed within the RESILIENT project for ongoing monitoring of the regulatory landscape), which served as the primary data collection tool for this report, builds upon international human rights standards, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. It has been developed based on European Civic Forum's Civic Space Report 2024²³, the CIVICUS Monitor database²⁴ and Oxfam's Civic Space Monitoring Tool²⁵. The instrument is structured around four interrelated dimensions of civic space which guided data collection, validation, and analysis across the EECA region:

23 Civic Space Watch. Civic Space Report 2024. Paris; European Civic Forum (ECF), 2024. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-HORIZONTAL-ANALYSIS.pdf>

24 CIVICUS Monitor. Civic Space Scores. Johannesburg; CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, 2025. <https://monitor.civicus.org/data/>

25 Oxfam International. Civic Space Monitoring Tool. Oxford; Oxfam International, 2019. <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/10546/620874/1/gd-civic-space-monitoring-tool-041019-en.pdf>



1 Freedom of association: a legal and regulatory framework enabling CSOs to register and operate freely; restrictions on forming or joining organisations; and barriers to funding and financial sustainability;



2 Freedom of peaceful assembly: legal guarantees for public protests and demonstrations; incidence of restrictions, bans, or excessive use of force against protesters; and administrative or practical obstacles to organising assemblies;



3 Freedom of expression and access to information: protection of media and journalists; censorship, surveillance, and restrictions on online and offline speech; legal protections against defamation and hate speech laws used to restrict expression;



4 Criminalization of key populations and protection from reprisal: state duty to protect civil society actors from physical, verbal, and judicial attacks; incidence and response to intimidation, harassment, detention, or violence against activists. Criminalization component is important here as it impedes KPs to see protection from reprisal.

Data collection was conducted in 2025 through a structured regional monitoring process. Country focal points in each of the ten countries completed the Civic Space Monitoring in EECA Instrument which was designed to capture information on legal frameworks, enforcement practices, and documented incidents affecting civil society organisations (CSOs) and community-led organisations (CLOs) working on HIV, TB, and key populations from 1 January 2024 to 31 August 2025. The data acquired via this monitoring process is referred to in this report as 'submissions'.

In addition to the core instrument, country focal points submitted case documentation illustrating specific incidents related to restrictions, administrative pressure, violence, or reprisals, as well as references to relevant legislation, policy documents, court decisions, and publicly available sources. Where available, submissions were used to corroborate reported developments and to support the analysis.

The author used other publicly available information, including global, regional and country analytical reports and statistics, as well as legislative acts of the ten countries, to supplement the information contained in submissions and case studies.

The scope of the methodology is indicative rather than exhaustive. While the Civic Space Monitoring in EECA Instrument captures a broad range of legal, policy, and practical developments, the analysis does not aim to provide a comprehensive legal review for each country. Rather, it seeks to identify patterns, divergences, and recurring challenges that shape the operating environment for community-led HIV and TB responses across the region.

Findings

1. Overview of responses and key regional trends

The analysis of country submissions indicates that civic space for civil society and community-led organisations working on HIV and key population issues across the EECA region remains uneven, fragile and increasingly shaped by a combination of formal legal restrictions and informal practices. **Georgia** stands out among the countries assessed as a case where multiple pressures on civic space have converged rapidly, reshaping an environment that had previously been regarded as comparatively open.

CASE BOX 1

Georgia – Rapid Contraction of Civic Space Following 2024–2025 Legislative Changes

Georgia entered the 2025 reporting period amid a sharp deterioration in the operating environment for civil society and community-led organisations. Long-standing polarisation accelerated into a legislative agenda that expanded state leverage over civil society financing, narrowed acceptable public discourse on 'morality' and 'family values', and intensified risks for groups working on HIV, harm reduction and key populations.

Foreign influence regulation and the 'chilling effect' on civil society. In 2024, Georgia adopted the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, requiring non-commercial entities and media receiving more than 20 percent of funding from foreign sources to register and comply with enhanced reporting and oversight requirements, with penalties for non-compliance. The law triggered mass protests and drew strong criticism from domestic civil society and international actors, including the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and major human rights organisations who warned it resembled 'foreign agent' approaches and could stigmatise and constrain independent organisations²⁶.

Escalation toward criminal liability. In February 2025, the ruling Georgian Dream party registered a separate legislative initiative entitled the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). According to the national submission, the draft law introduces criminal liability for failure to comply with registration and reporting requirements, accompanied by amendments to the Criminal Code

26 Reuters. Georgia fired 700 civil servants for supporting pro-EU protests, watchdog says. Thomson Reuters, April 15, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgia-fired-700-civil-servants-supporting-pro-eu-protests-watchdog-says-2025-04-15/>;

Vincent F. Georgian government intensifies the repression of its opponents as protests. Dwindle. Paris; Le Monde, April 19, 2025. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/04/19/in-georgia-the-government-intensifies-the-repression-of-its-opponents-as-protests-dwindle_6740401_4.html

envisaging punishments of up to five years in prison. Although the bill had not yet been adopted at the time of reporting, its registration marked a significant escalation from administrative oversight toward criminalisation of civil society activity, reinforcing fears of repression among CSOs and community-led organisations. Organisations working on HIV, harm reduction and key population issues identified the proposed law as a major deterrent to public advocacy, formal registration and sustained engagement with international partners.

'Family values' and child protection measures – shrinking permissible speech and visibility.

Alongside the foreign influence framework, Georgia advanced and adopted a broad 'family values / protection of minors' package in 2024, widely reported as restricting public discussion and positive depiction of LGBTQI+ identities in media and public life. The package intensified social hostility and heightened security risks for LGBTQI+ communities and allied organisations, with credible reporting linking the environment to rising fear of violence and impunity²⁷.

Hostility, safety risks, and limits on assembly and expression. Even where formal rights remain on paper, the combination of hostile rhetoric, community stigma, and inconsistent protection against violence reduces the space for public-facing work. This is particularly relevant for HIV and key population programming where effective outreach and rights-based communication depend on visibility, trust, and safe engagement in public and online spaces²⁸.

Funding landscape and operational impact. As many independent CSOs and community-led initiatives rely substantially on external funding, the foreign influence framework increases compliance burdens and reputational risk, and discourages engagement with sensitive themes, including human rights, HIV and key population issues. In April 2025, the Georgian Law on Grants was amended to include the requirement of government approval before receipt of a foreign grant²⁹. Civil society monitors have described effects including more cautious public communications, reduced visibility, and risk management choices that can undermine advocacy, community mobilisation, and the sustainability of rights-based services³⁰.

Why this matters for the report's focus. In practice, these developments are not only political – they reshape the delivery environment for HIV and TB responses by constraining the ability of community-led organisations to communicate openly, organise publicly, partner safely, and sustain funding – with a disproportionate impact on initiatives working with LGBTQI+ communities, people who use drugs, sex workers, and other marginalised groups.

27 Megrelidze S, Litvinova D. Georgia's anti-LGBTQ+ measures raise fears of hate crimes in the conservative South Caucasus nation. Tbilisi; Associated Press, September 26, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/georgia-crackdown-lgbtq-rights-election-russia-af51de7625d8ed349e858eeb5da1f66b>; Kassam A. Georgian president refuses to sign anti-LGBTQ+ rights bill into law. London; The Guardian, 2 October 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/02/georgian-president-refuses-to-sign-anti-lgbtq-rights-bill-into-law>

28 Kassam A., Ibid.

29 REVERA. Legislative Updates in Georgia: April – June 2025. 8 September 2025. <https://georgia.revera.legal/en/info-centr/news-and-analytical-materials/353-novosti-zakonodatelstva-gruzii/>

30 Civic Space Watch. Civic Space Report 2025. Paris; European Civic Forum (ECF), 2025. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Civic-Space-Report-2025-ECF.pdf>; Amnesty International. Georgia: Dark day as parliament bulldozes adoption of repressive "foreign influence" bill. London; Amnesty International, 14 May 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/georgia-dark-day-as-parliament-bulldozes-adoption-of-repressive-foreign-influence-bill/>

While the legal and political contexts vary significantly across countries, several cross-cutting regional trends emerge.

- **First**, civic space in the region is characterised by strong divergence between countries, with markedly different regulatory environments governing civil society. Some countries operate under explicitly restrictive legal frameworks, including foreign agent or foreign influence legislation, broad limitations on funding and extensive criminalisation affecting key populations. Others maintain comparatively permissive legal frameworks, yet still experience meaningful constraints through administrative practices, selective enforcement and informal pressure. This diversity underscores that formal legal guarantees alone are insufficient to assess the real operating environment for civil society.
- **Second**, a persistent gap between formal rights and practical realities is evident across most countries. Even where freedoms of association, assembly and expression are legally protected, organisations report challenges in registering, maintaining operations, accessing funding, engaging with authorities or operating publicly without risk. These challenges are particularly acute for organisations led by or working with people living with HIV and key populations, whose activities are often treated as politically or socially sensitive.
- **Third**, restrictions tend to be cumulative rather than isolated. Civic space is shaped not by a single measure, but by the interaction of multiple legal and administrative constraints – including NGO regulation, assembly rules, monitoring of public activities, limitations on information and expression, and criminalisation affecting key populations. Together, these pressures incentivise organisations to reduce visibility, limit advocacy, shift to less contested areas of work or discontinue certain services altogether.
- **Fourth**, criminalisation of key populations remains a central structural factor influencing civic space across the region for organisations and activists providing help to key populations or representing these communities. Laws and practices affecting people who use drugs, LGBTQI+ communities, sex workers and people living with HIV expose individuals to arrest, prosecution and violence, while simultaneously constraining the ability of civil society and community-led organisations to provide services, document rights violations and engage in public advocacy. Criminalisation of key populations leads to lower opportunities for activists and organisations to seek state protection in case of rights violations or limitation of freedoms.
- **Finally**, a pattern of adaptation and risk management by civil society is visible across countries. Organisations increasingly adjust their strategies to mitigate risk – for example, by avoiding public events, limiting online presence, modifying documentation practices or reducing engagement with authorities. While such adaptations may enable short-term survival, they also reflect a contraction of meaningful civic participation and weaken community-led responses to HIV and TB over time.

The following sections examine these patterns in greater detail, while also providing a more granular analysis of country experiences across the four core dimensions of civic space monitored through the Instrument.

2. Adaptation, coping strategies and resilience of community-led organisations

Across the EECA region, civil society and community-led organisations have not responded to shrinking civic space solely through retreat or self-censorship. While defensive risk-management strategies remain widespread, communities have simultaneously developed proactive advocacy approaches to challenge restrictive policies, seek accountability and sustain rights-based HIV and TB responses.

2.1. Defensive adaptation and risk mitigation

As documented across multiple sections of this report, organisations increasingly adjust their operational models to reduce exposure to legal, administrative and security risks. These strategies include limiting public visibility; reframing advocacy in neutral public-health language; shifting from open assemblies to closed meetings or online formats; modifying communications on sensitive issues such as drug use, sexuality and gender; and prioritising service delivery over rights-based campaigning where space has narrowed.

In several contexts, organisations have revised statutory language, avoided explicit reference to key populations, reduced social media presence, and suspended public outreach activities following the adoption of foreign influence legislation, 'anti-propaganda' laws and expanded administrative controls. While these adaptations allow short-term continuity of essential services, they also reflect a contraction of civic participation and diminished capacity for collective advocacy.

2.2. Proactive advocacy and international engagement

Alongside defensive strategies, regional networks and national organisations increasingly engage international human rights mechanisms as alternative arenas for accountability where domestic advocacy is constrained. Community groups working with LGBTQI+ communities, people who use drugs, sex workers and people living with HIV have systematically documented rights violations and submitted alternative reports to United Nations treaty bodies, special procedures and the Universal Periodic Review process.

Regional organisations, including ECOM, EHRA, EWNA and SWAN, have supported activists across the EECA region in compiling evidence on repression, violence and discriminatory laws, ensuring that domestic restrictions are elevated to international forums. These reports have contributed to formal recommendations to governments on repealing punitive legislation, strengthening protection of civil society and addressing discrimination against key populations.

There has been a shift from national toward transnational advocacy, whereby communities leverage global human-rights architecture to counterbalance shrinking national civic space and maintain political pressure on authorities.

This strategy reflects a broader shift toward transnational advocacy, whereby communities leverage global human rights architecture to counterbalance shrinking national civic space and maintain political pressure on authorities.

2.3. Community-led monitoring and evidence-based accountability

A central component of adaptive advocacy across the EECA region has been the expansion of community-led monitoring of rights violations, service barriers and enforcement practices affecting key populations. Community networks of people living with HIV, people who use drugs, LGBTQI+ communities and sex workers have systematically collected data on violence, discrimination, administrative obstruction, the impacts of criminalisation and access to health services.

This evidence has been consolidated into national and regional monitoring reports and used to inform policy dialogue with governments, the Global Fund country processes, donor engagement and reports to international human rights mechanisms. In several countries, community-generated data has directly supported advocacy on drug policy reform, HIV criminalisation, protection gaps for LGBTQI+ communities and the impact of punitive enforcement on service uptake.

By transforming lived experience into documented evidence, community-led organisations have strengthened their legitimacy, credibility and negotiating power in constrained civic environments. Where open protest and public campaigning are restricted, monitoring has emerged as a key mechanism through which communities sustain accountability, influence policy processes and assert their rights.

2.4. Coalition building and cross-movement solidarity

In response to overlapping restrictions affecting multiple marginalised groups, organisations increasingly pursue cross-movement collaboration. Networks linking harm reduction groups, LGBTQI+ organisations, women's rights advocates, sex worker collectives and human rights defenders have strengthened information sharing, joint advocacy and mutual protection mechanisms.

Such coalitions allow organisations to pool resources, coordinate responses to restrictive legislation and sustain advocacy even where individual groups face heightened vulnerability. In several countries, community actors reported that collective action – whether through shared statements, joint monitoring or coordinated international reporting – provides greater resilience than isolated organisational efforts.

Networks linking harm reduction groups, LGBTQI+ organisations, women's rights advocates, sex worker collectives and human rights defenders have strengthened information sharing, joint advocacy and mutual protection mechanisms. Such collaboration increases political legitimacy and reduces the risk of individual groups being singled out for retaliation, demonstrating the protective and strategic value of coalition-based advocacy even in a context of increasing regulatory pressure.

In **Ukraine**, repeated legislative initiatives proposing criminal or administrative liability for so-called 'drug propaganda' prompted coordinated responses from harm reduction, HIV, human rights and media freedom organisations. A broad informal coalition involving community networks, public health NGOs and legal experts – including organisations affiliated with EHRA and ECOM – jointly analysed draft laws, prepared legal opinions, engaged parliamentary committees and communicated risks to international partners. This cross-movement engagement contributed to the withdrawal or stalling of several draft bills between 2020 and 2023 and helped reframe public discussion from moral panic toward public health, proportionality and human rights obligations. Importantly, collaboration between drug policy, LGBTQI+ and HIV organisations increased political legitimacy and reduced the risk of individual groups being singled out for retaliation, demonstrating the protective and strategic value of coalition-based advocacy even in a context of increasing regulatory pressure.

2.5. Public mobilisation and legislative pushback

Although public protest remains risky or effectively impossible in several Central Asian contexts and Belarus, instances of large-scale civic mobilisation demonstrate that communities continue to contest restrictive governance when space allows.

In **Georgia**, mass protests against foreign influence legislation and morality-based restrictions during 2024–2025 reflected sustained resistance from civil society, human rights defenders and community groups. These mobilisations, while met with political pressure and escalating legal measures, illustrate that shrinking civic space has not eliminated collective action but rather intensified contestation over democratic freedoms and civil society independence.

2.6. Strategic litigation and legal empowerment

Where feasible, organisations have pursued legal challenges to contest discriminatory policies, administrative barriers and punitive enforcement practices. This includes constitutional complaints, strategic test cases and engagement with international legal mechanisms.

Support from international partners and legal aid networks has enabled community groups to document violations, build jurisprudence and challenge overly broad interpretations of 'propaganda', public morality and foreign influence provisions. While litigation remains uneven in reach and impact across the region, it constitutes an important tool for safeguarding space and setting legal precedents.

In **Georgia**, a coalition of civil society actors has taken formal legal action to challenge the country's Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence – legislation widely criticised for its chilling effect on civil society space and its onerous registration and reporting requirements for organisations receiving external funding. Following the 2024 adoption of the law, 16 media organisations, around 120 civil society organisations, and several private individuals filed a joint appeal with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) arguing that the law violates fundamental rights protected by the

European Convention on Human Rights, including freedom of expression, association, privacy and discrimination protections. The appeal was registered with the ECHR and represents a major effort by civil society to use international legal mechanisms to contest domestic restrictions on civic space. This legal challenge follows domestic action in Georgia’s Constitutional Court, where NGOs sought interim relief to suspend the law’s implementation (which was refused) and underscores how organisations in the EECA region are increasingly using strategic litigation and international human rights frameworks to push back against restrictive legal environments.

3. Freedom of association

Freedom of association remains under pressure in several parts of the region, with governments introducing or implementing laws that expand state control over CSOs and constrain their access to funding. While all ten countries formally recognise this right in their constitutions, the practical environment for non-governmental and community-led organisations (CLOs) varies widely. Two countries – **Kyrgyzstan and Georgia** – adopted foreign-agent-style legislation during the reporting period. In several other countries, including **Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan**, submissions describe restrictive regulatory frameworks governing registration, reporting and funding of CSOs that, in practice, similarly limit organisational independence, despite the absence of formally designated ‘foreign agent’ laws.

The table below provides a comparative overview of selected indicators related to freedom of association under the Civil Space Monitoring in EECA Instrument, summarising how restrictive legislation, registration practices, funding conditions and administrative pressure manifest across the assessed countries. It offers a high level snapshot rather than a definitive assessment: the colour coding reflects general tendencies but does not capture the full range of contextual nuances. In particular, ‘YES’ responses may indicate either enabling or restrictive conditions depending on the question. The analysis that follows examines these patterns in greater detail, providing a more granular discussion of how freedom of association is experienced in practice across the region.

TABLE 1: Comparative snapshot related to freedom of association

No	Question text	AM	AZ	BE	GE	KZ	KY	MD	TJ	UA	UZ
1	Does your country currently have a ‘foreign agent’ law?	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
2	Are there any other laws adopted that restrict registration, operation and/ or funding of CSOs?	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES

No	Question text	AM	AZ	BE	GE	KZ	KY	MD	TJ	UA	UZ
3	Can community-led (PLHIV, PUD, LGBTQI+, SW) organisations register and maintain operations (e.g. open a bank account) in your country? <i>If at least one community group was denied registration of a CLO or was prevented from maintaining operations, the answer is 'NO'. 'YES' may mean that either all registration applications of community groups were granted and CLOs have not faced any bureaucratic obstacles for continued operation, or no applications have been filed to register a CLO/there are no registered CLOs operating in the country.</i>	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO
4	Have there been cases during 2024-2025 of CSOs & community-led organisations working in the HIV/KP field closing and/or activists from KPs arrested due to adopted 'foreign agent' law or other laws restricting registration, operation and/or funding of CSOs? <i>If at least one organisation reported closing/ one activist getting arrested, the answer is 'YES'.</i>	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO
5	Were there cases during 2024-2025 when CSOs & community-led organisations working in the HIV/KP field had to undergo unnecessarily frequent (as according to the law) fiscal or any other audits and governmental checks ? <i>If at least one CSO or CLO had to undergo unnecessary audits and government checks, the answer is 'YES'.</i>	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	N/A	YES	NO
6	Have CSOs & community-led organisations working in the HIV/KP field been exposed to raids by law enforcement or other official authorities during 2024-2025? <i>If at least one CSO or CLO has been exposed to a law enforcement raid, the answer is 'YES'.</i>	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO

№	Question text	AM	AZ	BE	GE	KZ	KY	MD	TJ	UA	UZ
7	Have CSOs & community-led organisations working in the HIV/KP field been prevented from receiving domestic funding (state, municipal, crowdfunding within the country) during 2024-2025? <i>If at least one CSO or CLO has been prevented from receiving domestic funding, the answer is 'YES'.</i>	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO
8	Have CSOs & community-led organisations working in the HIV/KP field been prevented from receiving foreign funding during 2024-2025? <i>If at least one CSO or CLO has been prevented from receiving foreign funding, the answer is 'YES'.</i>	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES

3.1. Restrictive legislation: foreign agent laws and analogous measures

In April 2024, **Kyrgyzstan** enacted amendments to the Law on Non-Commercial Organisations³¹, introducing the status of 'Foreign Representative' for NGOs receiving foreign funding and engaging in broadly defined “political activities”. The law, signed by the President on 2 April and effective from 15 April 2024, requires registration of such organisations in a special registry, submission of annual financial reports, and possible inspections by the Ministry of Justice.

Although framed as a transparency measure, the law closely mirrors the Russian 'foreign agent' model and has generated significant concern among human rights defenders, journalists and service delivery organisations. According to the national submission, at least five organisations had been added to the registry by mid-2025, while many others reported suspending or postponing public advocacy activities to avoid potential designation. For CLOs working on HIV, harm reduction or LGBTIQ+ issues, the law introduces uncertainty about permissible advocacy and increases the risk of reputational stigma.

Georgia adopted its Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence³² in May 2024, overriding a presidential veto after weeks of mass protests and strong criticism from international partners. The

31 ЗАКОН КЫРГЫЗСКОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ. О некоммерческих организациях. от 15 октября 1999 года № 111. (Law of the Kyrgyz Republic. About non-profit organisations. No. 111 dated October 15, 1999). Bishkek; Централизованный банк данных правовой информации Кыргызской Республики (Centralised database of legal information of the Kyrgyz Republic), Ministry of Justice. <https://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/274/edition/6030/ru> (in Russian).

32 „უცხოური გავლენის გამჭვირვალობის შესახებ“ (საქართველოს პრეზიდენტმა გამოიყენა ვეტოს უფლება №07-1/32/10; 18/05/2024) (On the Transparency of Foreign Influence (The President of Georgia exercised the right of veto No. 07-1/32/10; 05/18/2024). Tbilisi; Parliament of Georgia. <https://parliament.ge/legislation/28355> (in Georgian).

law entered into force in August 2024 and requires all non-commercial legal entities and media outlets receiving more than 20 percent of their annual funding from abroad to register as “organisations under foreign influence”. Failure to comply may result in administrative sanctions and substantial fines. In addition to the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, a separate draft Foreign Agents Registration Act registered in February 2025 proposes criminal liability – including imprisonment – for non-compliance, signalling a potential further tightening of state control over civil society.

Although the Georgian government presents the measure as a transparency reform, domestic and international observers – including the Venice Commission³³ and Transparency International Georgia³⁴ – have concluded that its content, rationale and rhetoric replicate key features of foreign agent frameworks. CSOs report that the law has already produced a chilling effect, discouraging public advocacy, limiting engagement with state institutions, and reducing participation in policy dialogue, including those related to HIV and TB.

According to the national focal point, organisations providing community-led health services are reviewing their communication and funding strategies to minimise exposure to the ‘foreign influence’ label.

3.2. Registration of community-led organisations

The ability of CLOs to obtain and retain registration, and to maintain active legal status, remains uneven across the region. Across several countries assessed, a recurring pattern emerges in which the registration of community-led organisations is formally permitted under national legislation, but constrained in practice by additional administrative requirements and discretionary interpretation by authorities. While registration frameworks often provide an exhaustive list of formal criteria, country submissions indicate that organisations working with key populations – particularly LGBTQI+ communities and people who use drugs – face heightened scrutiny of statutory language, mission statements or activities. This creates a situation in which legal registration exists in principle, but cannot always be relied upon as a stable basis for operation.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, non-commercial organisations are subject to mandatory review of organisational statutes, a requirement not applied to commercial entities. While community-led organisations may have registered in earlier years, maintaining active legal status has become increasingly difficult. Organisations working with key populations – particularly LGBTQI+ groups – report that explicit references to community identity in statutes create risks during re-registration or compliance procedures. As a result, over the past one-to-two years, many organisations have revised their mission statements toward broader formulations or reduced public visibility to avoid scrutiny.

33 Georgia Today. Venice Commission calls for repeal of Georgian “Foreign Agents” Law, warns of threats to democracy. Tbilisi; Georgia Today, October 16, 2025. <https://georgiatoday.ge/venice-commission-calls-for-repeal-of-georgian-foreign-agents-law-warns-of-threats-to-democracy>

34 Transparency International. Georgia: Approval of ‘Foreign Agents Law’ threatens democratic progress and EU integration. Berlin; Transparency International, 15 May 2024. <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/georgia-approval-of-foreign-agents-law-threatens-democratic-progress-and-eu-integration>

Belarus maintains a particularly restrictive environment. Organisations have been dissolved in previous years, and new registration is widely perceived as unsafe or impracticable. The assessment notes that LGBTQI+ organisations and those providing services to KPs face the highest barriers, with applicants sometimes discouraged from registering due to the risk of later inspections, fines or dissolution.

In **Georgia**, registration of community-led organisations is formally accessible. However, country submissions point out that maintaining stable operations has become more uncertain following the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence. Organisations receiving foreign funding report heightened caution during routine compliance and public communications, particularly where activities relate to key populations. This has contributed to more conservative programming and reduced public visibility rather than outright closure.

Several countries reported no explicit legal prohibitions on the registration of CLOs, but highlighted the existence of nuanced or informal barriers. In **Kazakhstan**, while community-led organisations are able to register in law, the country submission indicates challenges in maintaining effective operations, particularly in relation to banking access and administrative compliance. Organisations working with people who use drugs or LGBTQI+ communities report difficulties opening or maintaining bank accounts and navigating approvals, which undermines organisational sustainability despite formal registration. In **Uzbekistan**, the submission does not flag formal barriers to registration, but highlights challenges in maintaining active operations over time. CLOs report that ongoing administrative requirements and scrutiny around programmatic activities encourage cautious engagement, self-censorship and prioritisation of service delivery over rights-based advocacy.

3.3. Funding restrictions and access to resources

Across the region, access to funding for CSOs and community-led organisations is rarely prohibited outright, but frequently constrained through administrative requirements, discretionary approvals and informal pressure, with a disproportionate impact on organisations working with key populations.

Restrictions on funding – particularly foreign funding – were most sharply noted in **Belarus**, where organisations have faced long-standing and systemic limitations on receiving international grants.

In several countries, including **Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan**, it was reported that access to foreign funding is formally permitted but is complicated in practice by administrative requirements, informal pressure and the unpredictability around approvals. In **Uzbekistan**, these constraints manifest primarily through complex grant registration procedures and requirements to obtain clearances from government entities.

In **Georgia**, foreign funding remains legally accessible; however, the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence has increased reputational and compliance risks for organisations

receiving external support. CSOs and CLOs working with key populations report heightened caution in their use of foreign funding, including more conservative public communication, adjustments to programmatic focus and reduced visibility of advocacy activities.

Crowdfunding and domestic fundraising remain limited in most assessed countries. Data from countries suggests that this reflects a combination of limited access to public funding mechanisms, societal stigma toward key populations and uncertainty around regulatory and administrative requirements for domestic fundraising, which together discourage visible or large-scale local fundraising efforts. As a result, organisations serving key populations rely heavily on external donors, which increases their vulnerability to changes in political attitudes toward foreign funding.

3.4. Audits, inspections and pressure on organisations

Although not all countries reported documented cases of audits and inspections during the assessment period, information from several countries indicates that the perceived risk of administrative checks continues to influence the work of organisations, particularly those working with key populations.

In **Belarus**, organisations that have previously been subject to inspections or raids continue to operate in a context of sustained uncertainty, with the threat of administrative checks remaining ever-present. In **Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan**, authorities retain broad powers to initiate unscheduled inspections which organisations perceive as a deterrent to working with key populations.

There were no documented instances of the closure of organisations that work with KPs during the reporting period specifically as a result of a foreign agent law or similar measures. It was, however, reported that organisations in several countries have reduced their scope of work, shifted to less visible activities or avoided open engagement with sensitive communities. For instance, in **Belarus**, most independent NGOs and CLOs were reportedly dissolved or forced underground in earlier periods; remaining initiatives operate informally and avoid public visibility. In **Kyrgyzstan**, after adoption of the 'Foreign Representatives' law, several CSOs reduced advocacy activity, paused media campaigns, or switched to neutral 'public health' framing. In Georgia, organisations receiving foreign funding became cautious about public advocacy and visibility following the 2024 'Transparency of Foreign Influence' law. In **Uzbekistan**, CLOs reported self-censorship on politically, socially or culturally sensitive topics, prioritising service delivery over rights-based advocacy.

3.5. Overall trends and implications

The regional picture suggests a gradual narrowing of the space in which CSOs and CLOs can operate. Restrictive legislation, burdensome administrative practices and persistent uncertainty collectively contribute to a fragile operational environment.

For organisations working with key populations, these developments have concrete consequences. Advocacy becomes riskier; relationships with government institutions become more cautious; and the administrative burden of compliance grows. In several contexts, organisations have limited their public communication, reduced engagement in coalitions or avoided explicit human rights framing to avoid drawing negative attention.

The growing fear of targeted inspections or administrative scrutiny also affects service delivery. Organisations may limit the visibility of outreach activities, reduce the intensity of community engagement or hesitate to expand services in areas perceived as politically sensitive. This reduces the capacity of community-led responses to consistently reach key populations, undermining gains in HIV and TB prevention, care and linkage to services.

4. Freedom of peaceful assembly

Across the ten assessed countries, the right to peaceful assembly is formally recognised in law, yet its practical enjoyment remains uneven and, in several jurisdictions, increasingly restricted. The analysis points to a region marked by varying degrees of tolerance for public gatherings, differing levels of police engagement, and inconsistent protection for marginalised groups. Although many countries do not prohibit public assemblies outright, the space for spontaneous, sensitive or rights-related gatherings is often fragile, and activists frequently report feeling unsafe or inadequately protected.

It should be noted that public protests or street actions organised by key populations are inherently limited in much of the region. High levels of stigma, criminalisation and risk of violence mean that open street advocacy by organisations led by or working with LGBTQI+ communities, people who use drugs or sex workers is rarely practiced in most assessed countries regardless of formal legal guarantees. Only in a small number of contexts have public marches or assemblies related to gender equality or LGBTQI+ rights taken place in recent years. This context is essential for interpreting the data on peaceful assembly and the risks associated with public visibility and collective action.

The table below provides a comparative snapshot of how these conditions manifest across key indicators related to freedom of peaceful assembly.

TABLE 2: Comparative snapshot related to freedom of peaceful assembly

No	Question text	AM	AZ	BE	GE	KZ	KY	MD	TJ	UA	UZ
1	Since adoption of the 'foreign agent' law or other laws restricting registration, operation and/or funding of CSOs, has cooperation with governmental institutions become unsafe? E.g. started requesting additional, personal data; providing details of the event could end up in governmental officials storming in; provided data can end up with law enforcement institutions.	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES
2	Were there any signs or evidence that gatherings organised by CSOs & community-led organisations working in the HIV/KP field were watched, recorded and/or attended by governmental officials without consent of the organisers during 2024-2025?	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES
3	Have there been any major protests/demonstrations/public gatherings on issues related to human rights, services or lifestyles/existence of KPs (PLHIV, PUD, LGBTQI+, SW) during 2024-2025? Actions of solidarity, e.g. on 1st December, are not included here.	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO

4.1. Legal frameworks and administrative requirements

Most countries require organisers to notify municipal authorities before holding assemblies, typically within a fixed number of days. While these procedures are formally framed as notification, in some countries – including **Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan** – they operate in practice as authorisation mechanisms, granting the authorities broad discretion to deny, restrict or relocate events. In these contexts, protests unrelated to politically, socially or culturally sensitive issues may proceed, but assemblies addressing human rights, LGBTQI+ equality or governance issues face higher scrutiny.

In **Belarus**, legislative changes adopted in previous years continue to have a profound impact. Authorities maintain full control over permissible locations for gatherings, apply stringent notification rules and impose administrative liability for unauthorised assemblies. The submission

notes that, in practice, public gatherings – particularly those involving vulnerable or marginalised groups – remain extremely limited.

By contrast, **Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine** maintain comparatively more permissive legal frameworks governing assembly. Nevertheless, all four countries reported incidents where marginalised communities, especially LGBTQI+ people, were exposed to hostility or violence when attempting to exercise this right. While laws may be comparatively liberal, the actual safety of participants often depends on the willingness and capacity of police to prevent or respond to attacks.

4.2. Safety and police response

Information from countries consistently points to a persistent gap between formal legality and real world safety, particularly for LGBTQI+ individuals and organisations, pointing to uneven police protection and limited accountability for violence during public events.

In Armenia, it was reported that while assemblies are generally permitted, public events involving LGBTQI+ communities face a heightened risk of violence. The vigil attack documented in Case Box 2 below illustrates ongoing challenges in ensuring effective police protection even when criminal investigations are initiated.

CASE BOX 2

Armenia – Violent Interference During a Candlelight Vigil Honouring a Transgender Woman (2023)

In August 2023, community activists and CSOs in Yerevan organised a candlelight vigil in Komitas Park to honour Adriana, a transgender woman who had been killed the previous day. The event was organised by Right Side Human Rights Defender NGO and gathered LGBTQI+ community members and allies. During the gathering, four individuals attacked participants by throwing bottles filled with sand and eggs, shouting threats and hate-motivated insults. Several attendees were injured before police intervened.

While authorities opened a criminal case under Article 195, Part 2 of the Criminal Code (violent acts motivated by hatred or intolerance), the investigation remained inactive for months, and key victims, including transgender activist Lilit Martirosyan, were formally recognised only in April 2024. Activists reported that the delayed and ineffective response reinforced a perception of selective protection and institutional bias against LGBTQI+ communities.

CSOs, including Right Side Human Rights Defender NGO and allied organisations, described the incident as part of a broader pattern of intimidation and violence targeting sexual and gender minorities. Following the attack, fear increased within the community and participation in public events declined, illustrating a chilling effect on peaceful assembly and advocacy.

The incident illustrates how hate-motivated non-state violence, combined with inadequate and delayed state protection, undermines freedom of peaceful assembly even where formal guarantees exist.

In **Georgia**, the submission referenced the killing of a trans woman and the subsequent public mourning, noting concerns about the safety environment for trans communities and activists. The incident drew broad condemnation from civil society groups but was met with a muted official response, reinforcing concerns about impunity and inadequate state protection for gender and sexual minorities. Activists reported that the attack intensified fear within the community, with several organisations temporarily suspending public visibility or outreach activities, despite Georgia's otherwise pluralistic civic landscape.

Similar to Armenia, a case of violence against LGBTQI+ activists was documented in Ukraine during a public event in Kyiv (see Case Box 5 in the 'Protection from Reprisal' section below). Although police intervened, the follow-up investigation was reportedly limited, and no perpetrators were held accountable. While such incidents remain isolated and the overall civic environment in **Ukraine** is comparatively open, they contribute to a climate of caution among activists addressing sensitive issues.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, the adoption of the 2023 Law on Prevention of Harm to Children³⁵ has created additional sensitivity around LGBTQI+-related public events. Information from the country suggests that such gatherings may be discouraged, restricted or exposed to heightened risk of interference from state and non-state actors.

Submissions from Central Asian countries – including **Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan** – did not report specific cases of violence during assemblies in the reporting period. However, they did emphasise that public events addressing human rights or KPs are typically avoided due to fears of negative attention from authorities, the possibility of unscheduled inspections and broader societal hostility. In **Uzbekistan**, the 2021 attack on blogger and activist Miraziz Bazarov continues to be cited as a cautionary example shaping avoidance of public visibility around LGBTQI+ issues (see Case Box 3 below). As a result, many organisations in the subregion prefer closed meetings, indoor workshops or online formats over public assemblies.

35 ЗАКОН КЫРГЫЗСКОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ. О мерах по предупреждению причинения вреда здоровью детей, их физическому, интеллектуальному, психическому, духовному и нравственному развитию в Кыргызской Республике. от 21 июля 2015 года № 185 (Law of the Kyrgyz Republic. On measures to prevent harm to the health of children and their physical, intellectual, mental, spiritual, and moral development in the Kyrgyz Republic. No. 185 dated July 21, 2015). Bishkek; Централизованный банк данных правовой информации Кыргызской Республики (Centralised database of legal information of the Kyrgyz Republic), Ministry of Justice. <https://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/111229/edition/1273540/ru> (in Russian).

CASE BOX 3

Uzbekistan – The Case of Miraziz Bazarov (2021-2022)

In March 2021, blogger and human rights activist Miraziz Bazarov was brutally attacked by unidentified assailants near his home in Tashkent after publicly calling for the decriminalisation of same-sex relations in Uzbekistan. He sustained serious injuries, including a fractured leg and head trauma, and was hospitalised. Instead of ensuring accountability for the attackers, authorities later opened a criminal case against Bazarov himself, charging him with “defamation” and “insult” of the state under Articles 139–140 of the Criminal Code.

In January 2022, the Tashkent City Court sentenced Bazarov to three years of restricted freedom, effectively placing him under prolonged house arrest. The perpetrators of the assault were never identified or prosecuted. Human Rights Watch and Freedom House documented the case as an example of judicial harassment and reprisal for exercising freedom of expression, noting that the authorities failed to conduct an impartial investigation into the attack.

Although the case did not directly concern a NGO, its consequences for the LGBTQI+ community and broader civil society were profound. Following the attack and prosecution, most visible LGBTQI+ activism in Uzbekistan ceased. Activists and community groups went underground, fearing surveillance and violence, while donors and local partners became reluctant to support rights-based initiatives. The case marked a turning point for LGBTQI+ activism in Uzbekistan, illustrating how criminalisation, public hostility and impunity can jointly silence entire communities.

4.3. Targeted interference and informal pressure

While direct bans on assemblies targeting KPs were not widely reported, submissions from several countries highlighted patterns of informal pressure, administrative obstruction and event relocation that, in practice, limit the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly.

In **Azerbaijan**, the legal environment allows assemblies in principle, but it was reported that public visibility of KPs – particularly LGBTQI+ and sex worker communities – is minimal, partly due to reported concerns about public hostility and the selective application of administrative laws.

In **Belarus**, any form of public assembly is effectively constrained by strict notification requirements, designated protest zones and the risk of administrative sanctions. Public events involving LGBTQI+ communities are especially vulnerable and rarely held in open public spaces.

In **Kazakhstan**, authorities retain broad discretion to deny or relocate events deemed sensitive, which has reportedly led organisations working with KPs to avoid public gatherings altogether, opting for private venues and stakeholder roundtables rather than protests or awareness marches. This practice is illustrated by repeated refusals by the Almaty city administration to

authorise a women's march on International Women's Day, citing vague risks to public order despite the notification-based legal framework for assemblies. Appeals against these refusals were rejected using identical reasoning, reinforcing concerns about arbitrary decision-making and the use of administrative discretion to restrict peaceful assemblies addressing gender equality and women's rights³⁶.

Across **Tajikistan and Uzbekistan**, informal discouragement plays a considerable role. Community-led groups reported that holding public demonstrations related to harm reduction or LGBTQI+ rights could draw unwanted attention from state structures. Although no explicit bans were reported, the prevailing environment makes such assemblies improbable, creating conditions in which the exercise of the right becomes highly unlikely in practice.

4.4. Overall trends and implications

Freedom of peaceful assembly in the EECA region can be described as “formally protected but unevenly experienced”. Countries such as Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine maintain comparatively permissive legal frameworks; however, reported incidents of violence – particularly against LGBTQI+ individuals – raise persistent concerns about the effectiveness and consistency of state protection. In contrast, Belarus and several Central Asian countries apply restrictive rules or maintain discouraging environments that leave little practical space for public mobilisation, especially for organisations working with key populations.

For community-led HIV and TB responses, these restrictions have direct consequences. When public gatherings are unsafe or discouraged, opportunities for visibility, solidarity, mobilisation and advocacy are curtailed – community-led organisations confine their engagement to closed settings, limiting their ability to reach new constituents, articulate community needs or advocate for rights-affirming policies. Over time, these constraints erode the public presence of key populations and weaken the broader ecosystem necessary to sustain rights-based, community-led health responses.

For community-led HIV and TB responses, restrictions to the freedom of peaceful assembly have direct consequences. When public gatherings are unsafe or discouraged, opportunities for visibility, solidarity, mobilisation and advocacy are curtailed - community-led organisations confine their engagement to closed settings, limiting their ability to reach new constituents, articulate community needs or advocate for rights-affirming policies. Over time, these constraints erode the public presence of KPs and weaken the broader ecosystem necessary to sustain rights-based, community-led health responses.

36 Акимат Алматы в третий раз отказал фемактивисткам в проведении женского марша 8 марта (The Almaty mayor's office has denied feminist activists permission to hold a women's march on March 8 for the third time). Almaty; Exclusive, February 2, 2024. <https://exclusive.kz/akimat-almaty-v-tretij-raz-otkazal-femaktivistkam-v-provedenii-zhenskogo-marsha-8-marta/> (in Russian).

5. Freedom of expression and access to information

Across the ten countries covered by this analysis, restrictions on freedom of expression and access to information take several forms. These include 'anti-drug propaganda' provisions that constrain public communication about drugs and harm reduction; 'family values' and 'protection of children' laws used to restrict positive representation of LGBTQI+ people; and expanded controls on independent educational and advocacy activities, especially in online spaces. While the scope and intensity of these measures vary across countries, their cumulative effect is to narrow the space in which CLOs and CSOs can communicate openly about HIV, TB and the rights and health of key populations.

The table below provides a comparative snapshot related to freedom of expression and access to information, illustrating how these restrictions manifest across the assessed countries.

TABLE 3: Comparative snapshot related to freedom of expression and access to information

Nº	Question text	AM	AZ	BE	GE	KZ	KY	MD	TJ	UA	UZ
1	Does your country currently have laws restricting public information labelled as promoting drug use ('drug propaganda')?	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES
2	Does your country currently have laws restricting public information labelled as promoting LGBTQI+, positive depiction of LGBTQI+ identities and/or lifestyles ('LGBTQI+ propaganda')? These could also be laws protecting traditional/family values and/or children.	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
3	Have there been any restrictions on publishing, printing or sharing through social media of information about health and social services and rights of KPs introduced or practiced during 2024-2025?	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
4	Have there been cases of self-censorship by CSOs & community-led organisations working in the HIV/KP field (e.g. closing of social media channels, webpages, changing language of public channels)? Are there certain topics or causes that CSOs & community-led organisations working in the HIV/KP field avoid promoting because of a fear of negative repercussions during 2024-2025?	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES

5.1. 'Anti-drug propaganda' provisions

and their impact on harm reduction communications

Legal provisions that criminalise or otherwise restrict 'propaganda' or 'advertising' of drugs were documented in at least three countries – **Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan** – with additional criminalisation efforts under discussion in **Ukraine**.

In **Kazakhstan**, the Criminal Code³⁷ (Article 299-1) and the Code on Administrative Offences³⁸ (Article 423) together establish criminal and administrative liability for “propaganda or illegal advertising of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances or their analogues, precursors”. These norms are supplemented by the Law 'On Advertising'³⁹, which bans advertising of goods whose circulation is prohibited, including narcotic drugs. According to the country submission, these provisions are interpreted broadly in practice, including in relation to information disseminated through mass media and the internet, increasing legal risks for organisations that communicate about drugs, safer use and harm reduction.

In **Tajikistan**, “propaganda of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances or their precursors” is an administrative offence under Article 131 of the Code of Administrative Offences⁴⁰. This article has been reportedly used against cultural expressions (such as clothing styles and song lyrics) that authorities interpret as promoting drugs, illustrating how vaguely worded 'propaganda' provisions can be applied expansively, beyond direct drug-related communication.

In **Uzbekistan**, restrictions are anchored in the Law “On Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances”⁴¹, which prohibits propaganda of drug use (Article 34). In 2024, these restrictions were tightened: amendments to the Code of Administrative Liability⁴² made it punishable to disseminate

Laws and provisions on 'Anti-Drug Propaganda', 'LGBT propaganda', 'Family Values', 'public morality' and 'child protection' narrow the space for evidence-based discussion of key population health and rights, with knock-on effects for HIV prevention, access to accurate information and community empowerment.

37 Институт законодательства и правовой информации Республики Казахстан (Institute of legislation and legal information of the Republic of Kazakhstan). Уголовный кодекс Республики Казахстан. Кодекс Республики Казахстан от 3 июля 2014 года № 226-V ЗПК. (Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated July 3, 2014 No. 226-V ЗПК). Astana; Ministry of Justice. <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/K1400000226> (in Russian).

38 Институт законодательства и правовой информации Республики Казахстан (Institute of legislation and legal information of the Republic of Kazakhstan). Об административных правонарушениях (On Administrative Infractions). Кодекс Республики Казахстан от 5 июля 2014 года № 235-V ЗПК (The Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated 5 July 2014 № 235-V). Astana; Ministry of Justice. <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/K1400000235> (in Russian).

39 Институт законодательства и правовой информации Республики Казахстан (Institute of legislation and legal information of the Republic of Kazakhstan). О рекламе, Закон Республики Казахстан от 19 декабря 2003 года № 508. (On Advertising, The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated 19 December 2003 No. 508). Astana, Ministry of Justice. <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z030000508> (in Russian).

40 КОДЕКС РЕСПУБЛИКИ ТАДЖИКИСТАН ОБ АДМИНИСТРАТИВНЫХ ПРАВОНАРУШЕНИЯХ (Code of the Republic of Tajikistan on Administrative Offences). Dushanbe; Ministry of Justice, December 31, 2008. http://portali-huquqi.tj/publicadliya/view_qonunhoviev.php?showdetail=&asosi_id=10710 (in Russian).

41 Закон Республики Узбекистан (Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan). О НАРКОТИЧЕСКИХ СРЕДСТВАХ И ПСИХОТРОПНЫХ ВЕЩЕСТВАХ (About Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances). Tashkent; Ministry of Justice. <https://www.lex.uz/acts/86028> (in Russian).

42 Закон Республики Узбекистан (Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan). Кодекс Республики Узбекистан об административной ответственности (Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Administrative Responsibility). Tashkent; Ministry of Justice. <https://www.lex.uz/acts/97661> (in Russian).

and display on the internet content deemed to “propagate narcotic drugs”, including through online advertising and social media. This further heightens legal risks for online harm reduction content and for CLOs that rely on digital channels to reach people who use drugs.

In **Ukraine**, there is no separate law explicitly banning ‘propaganda of drug use’; instead, restrictions focus on the advertising of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances under the Law “On Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursors” (Article 6)⁴³. Nonetheless, attempts to introduce explicit ‘propaganda of drugs’ bans have been made repeatedly. Bill No. 2784 (2020)⁴⁴, which proposed liability for drug propaganda and expanded compulsory treatment, was withdrawn following advocacy by civil society and key population communities. Bill No. 5496 (2021)⁴⁵, which would criminalize “advertising or propaganda of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their analogues”, remains under consideration and has been flagged by monitors as a potential risk to organisations engaged in harm reduction and drug policy reform.

Taken together, these examples indicate that at least three countries of the region – Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – have operational ‘anti-drug propaganda’ provisions that may be applied to public information about drugs, while one additional country (Ukraine) is considering similar criminalisation. Across these contexts, civil society actors highlight the risk that such laws inhibit evidence-based communication on safer use, overdose prevention and drug policy reform, particularly for organisations led by people who use drugs.

5.2. ‘Family values’, child protection

and censorship of key population-related information

A second cluster of restrictions targets expression related to sexual orientation, sexual relationships, gender identity and LGBTQI+ rights, often framed in terms of protecting ‘family values’, ‘public morality’ or ‘child protection’. These measures have direct implications for HIV-related information as they can constrain open discussion of sex in general, sexuality, gender and other topics central to the health and rights of key populations, including people living with HIV, LGBTQI+ communities, sex workers and people who use drugs.

While these restrictions most explicitly affect expression related to sexual orientation and gender identity, country submissions indicate that similar rationales grounded in ‘family values’, ‘public morality’ and ‘child protection’ are also used to constrain information related to sex work and drug use. This pattern was illustrated, for example, by reported restrictions on online content related

43 ЗАКОН УКРАЇНИ (Law of Ukraine). Про наркотичні засоби, психотропні речовини і прекурсори (About narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and precursors). Kyiv; Ministry of Justice, Відомості Верховної Ради України (ВВР), 1995, № 10, ст.60 (Vedomosti Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (VVR), 1995, No. 10, p. 60). <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/60/95-%D0%B2%D1%80#Text> (in Ukrainian).

44 Верховна Рада України (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine). Проект Закону про внесення змін до деяких законодавчих актів України щодо протидії незаконному обігу наркотичних засобів, психотропних речовин і прекурсорів та зловживанню ними (Draft Law on Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine on Counteracting Illicit Trafficking in and Abuse of Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursors). Kyiv; Верховна Рада України (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine), 2784 від 17.01.2020 (2784 from 17.01.2020). http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=67952 (in Ukrainian).

45 Верховна Рада України (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine). Проект Закону про внесення змін до Кодексу законів про працю України щодо святкових і неробочих днів (Draft Law on Amendments to the Labour Code of Ukraine Regarding Holidays and Non-Working Days). Kyiv; Верховна Рада України (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine), 5496 від 06.12.2016 (5496 from 06.12.2016). http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=60643 (in Ukrainian).

to paid sexual services in Kyrgyzstan, framed as measures to protect public morality and children. Organisations reported that educational, outreach or advocacy materials addressing these topics may be discouraged, removed or avoided altogether – particularly in online spaces – due to fears of sanctions, content blocking or heightened scrutiny by authorities. In practice, this contributes to widespread self-censorship and limits access to accurate, evidence-based information for multiple key populations, including sex workers and people who use drugs, even in the absence of explicit prohibitions.

In **Georgia**, a wide-ranging 'family values' legislative package was adopted in September 2024⁴⁶, entering into force on 2 December 2024. The core bill, "On Family Values and Protection of Minors", is accompanied by 18 related draft laws amending the Civil Code, Labour Code, Broadcasting Law and Law on General Education. Among other things, Article 8 of the package prohibits broadcasters from disseminating content that "promotes identification with a gender other than one's biological sex or relationships between individuals of the same biological sex based on sexual orientation". National analysis describes this as legalised censorship with serious consequences for press freedom and the ability of media to "give voice to the LGBTQ+ community", forecasting a strong chilling effect on coverage of LGBTQ+ issues.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, the 2023 Law 'On Measures to Prevent Harm to the Health of Children and Their Physical, Intellectual, Mental, Spiritual and Moral Development'⁴⁷ introduces a broad ban on disseminating certain categories of information to minors. This includes information that encourages actions threatening children's health or life and, crucially for this analysis, information that "denies family and traditional social values, promotes LGBTQI+ and forms disrespect for parents or other family members". The law also restricts depiction of sexual relations even between heterosexual adults. Dissemination of "prohibited or restricted" information via media or internet resources can lead to fines of 10,000–25,000 som (~USD115–285 as of the date of publication) for organisations under the Code on Offences. This exposes CSOs working with LGBTQI+ communities and on sexuality education to sanctions for routine educational, information and advocacy activities.

In **Moldova**, there is no 'LGBT propaganda' law at national level. However, in May 2022, the People's Assembly of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia adopted a resolution, 'On the Prohibition of Propaganda of Non-Traditional Relations/LGBT'⁴⁸. According to the country

46 საქართველოს პარლამენტი (Parliament of Georgia). პარლამენტიმ „ოჯახური ღირებულებებისა და არასრულწლოვანის დაცვის შესახებ“ კანონპროექტი მესამე მოსმენით მიიღო (Parliament Endorsing Bill on the Protection of Family Values and Minors in III Reading). Tbilisi; საქართველოს პარლამენტი (Parliament of Georgia), 17 სექტემბერი 2024 (17 September 2024). <https://www.parliament.ge/en/media/news/parlamentma-ojakhuri-ghirebulebebis-a-arasrulslovanis-datsvis-shesakheb-kanonproekti-mesame-mosmenit-miigho>;

Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRF). Georgia: Family Values Bill imposes censorship on media. London; Article 19, September 30, 2024. <https://www.article19.org/resources/georgia-family-values-bill-imposes-censorship-on-media/>.

47 ЗАКОН КЫРГЫЗСКОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ (Law of the Kyrgyz Republic). О мерах по предупреждению причинения вреда здоровью детей, их физическому, интеллектуальному, психическому, духовному и нравственному развитию в Кыргызской Республике (On measures to prevent harm to the health of children and their physical, intellectual, mental, spiritual, and moral development in the Kyrgyz Republic). Bishkek; Ministry of Justice, от 21 июля 2015 года № 185 (No. 185 dated July 21, 2015). <https://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/111229/edition/1273540/ru> (in Russian).

48 Председатель Народного Собрания Гагаузии (Chairman of the People's Assembly of Gagauzia). ПОСТАНОВЛЕНИЕ. О запрете пропаганды нетрадиционных отношений, ЛГБТ на территории АТО Гагаузия (Гагауз Ери) (Resolution. On the prohibition of propaganda of non-traditional relationships, LGBT in the territory of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri)). Создано: 30.05.2022 (Created: May 30, 2022). мун. Комрат, 25 мая 2022 г. № 62-IV/VII (Comrat, May 25, 2022 No. 62-IV/VII). [https://database.ilga.org/api/downloader/download/1/MD%20-%20LEG%20-%20Propaganda%20Resolution%20\(2022\)%20-%20OR%20\(ru\).pdf](https://database.ilga.org/api/downloader/download/1/MD%20-%20LEG%20-%20Propaganda%20Resolution%20(2022)%20-%20OR%20(ru).pdf) (in Russian).

submission, this act has no legal force, contradicts the Constitution and national law, and cannot lawfully restrict freedom of expression or assembly; nonetheless, it signals hostile political rhetoric at subnational level and contributes to an atmosphere of uncertainty for LGBTQI+ related advocacy and public expression.

Based on the information submitted, at least two countries – Georgia and Kyrgyzstan – have adopted nationwide legal frameworks that restrict public communication on sexuality, identity and “non-traditional lifestyles”, while Moldova has seen a comparable initiative at subnational level. Although these measures are most explicit in relation to LGBTQI+ issues, they also affect information related to sex work and drug use through public morality and child protection rationales. Taken together, these restrictions narrow the space for evidence-based discussion of key population health and rights, with knock-on effects for HIV prevention, access to accurate information and community empowerment.

5.3. Controls on independent education, online content and advocacy

Beyond explicit ‘propaganda’ laws, several countries have introduced additional controls on independent educational and advocacy activities that shape how information about HIV, TB and key populations can be produced, shared and disseminated.

In **Uzbekistan**, November 2024 amendments to the Law ‘On Education’⁴⁹ and the Administrative Code⁵⁰ introduced a new regime for “educational (enlightenment) activity”. Independent trainings, seminars and lectures outside the formal education system now require official permission; unauthorised activities are subject to fines, and certain categories of individuals (including those with specific criminal records or undergoing drug treatment) are barred from conducting such activities. This effectively introduces state control over independent educational initiatives, including trainings on human rights, health and HIV, and creates new avenues for targeting activists and community educators. Combined with the 2024 tightening of liability for online “propaganda of drugs”, this creates a layered regime in which both the content of information (such as about drugs or sexuality) and the modalities of its dissemination (independent trainings, online channels) are regulated, with significant risk of sanctions for community-led organisations.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, the child protection law⁵¹ is explicitly linked to sanctions against organisations that disseminate “prohibited or restricted” information via media and internet resources. Fines under

49 Закон Республики Узбекистан. Об образовании. Принят Законодательной палатой 19 мая 2020 года
Одобрено Сенатом 7 августа 2020 года Принят Законодательной палатой 19 мая 2020 года
Одобрено Сенатом 7 августа 2020 года (Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan. About education. Passed by the Legislative Chamber on May 19, 2020. Approved by the Senate on August 7, 2020). <https://lex.uz/uz/docs/5013009> (in Russian).

50 Кодекс Республики Узбекистан об административной ответственности (Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Administrative Liability). <https://www.lex.uz/acts/97661> (in Russian).

51 ЗАКОН КЫРГЫЗСКОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ. О мерах по предупреждению причинения вреда здоровью детей, их физическому, интеллектуальному, психическому, духовному и нравственному развитию в Кыргызской Республике. от 21 июля 2015 года № 185 (Law of the Kyrgyz Republic. On measures to prevent harm to the health of children and their physical, intellectual, mental, spiritual, and moral development in the Kyrgyz Republic. No. 185 dated July 21, 2015). <https://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/111229/edition/1273540/ru> (in Russian).

Article 74 of the Code of Offences⁵² apply directly to CSOs and CLOs, incentivising self-censorship on topics such as LGBTQI+ rights, sexuality education and certain forms of drug policy advocacy that could be interpreted as falling within restricted categories.

Submissions from other countries, including **Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus**, did not identify comparable recent legal changes specifically regulating online content or independent educational activities beyond the broader civic space restrictions discussed elsewhere in this report. Accordingly, this subsection focuses on contexts where detailed, source-linked information was available.

5.4. Impact on HIV, TB and community-led responses

Taken together, the documented measures show a regional trend toward narrowing the space for public discussion of drugs, sexuality and rights – precisely the areas where CLOs and CSOs need to communicate openly to sustain effective HIV and TB responses. In countries where ‘propaganda’ provisions and censorship laws are in force (**Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan**, and, in a different form, Georgia), organisations working with people who use drugs, sex workers and LGBTQI+ communities face overlapping risks:

- that educational materials on safer drug use, substitution therapy or harm reduction could be misclassified as ‘propaganda of drugs’;
- that rights-based messaging, visibility campaigns or outreach related to sexuality, sex work or LGBTQI+ communities could be treated as prohibited content under ‘family values’ or child protection laws; and,
- that independent trainings, seminars or online campaigns could be penalised under new controls on educational and internet activities.

While some countries – notably **Moldova and Ukraine** – have so far avoided adopting nationwide ‘propaganda’ bans at national level, draft laws and subnational initiatives demonstrate that such measures remain politically salient and may resurface. In this context, the risk of self-censorship is significant: even where enforcement remains sporadic, the ambiguity of legal definitions and the severity of potential sanctions encourage organisations to narrow the scope of public information that they provide, reduce their online footprint or re-frame their work in less explicit or less visible terms.

Overall, restrictions on freedom of expression and access to information constitute a growing and cross-cutting threat to community-led HIV and TB responses in the EECA region. The next section of this report examines how these and other measures intersect with the criminalisation of people living with HIV and key populations and protection from reprisals.

52 КОДЕКС КЫРГЫЗСКОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ О ПРАВОНАРУШЕНИЯХ. Введен в действие Законом Кыргызской Республики от 28 октября 2021 года № 126 (Code of the Kyrgyz Republic on Violations of the Law. Enacted by Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 126 of October 28, 2021). Bishkek; Ministry of Justice. <https://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/3-36/edition/2102/ru> (in Russian).

6. Criminalisation of key populations and protection from reprisal

Criminalisation remains a defining feature of civic space across the ten countries assessed. While each country has its own legal architecture, several recurring patterns emerge that directly affect the rights, safety, and visibility of key populations, as well as the ability of community-led organisations to sustain HIV, TB and harm reduction services.

The table below provides a comparative snapshot of criminalisation-related indicators across the region, illustrating how laws and enforcement practices affecting drug use, same-sex relations, sex work and HIV exposure and transmission shape the operating environment for key populations and community-led organisations. It highlights both formal legal provisions and their practical implications for protection from reprisal.

TABLE 4: Comparative snapshot of criminalisation of communities

N ^o	Question text	AM	AZ	BE	GE	KZ	KY	MD	TJ	UA	UZ
1	Is drug use prohibited in the country (under criminal and/or administrative code or other legal document)?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES
2	Is drug possession for personal use prohibited in the country (under criminal and/or administrative code or other legal document)?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
3	Does the patient registry of people using drugs restrict some of their rights (e.g. obtaining/maintaining driving license, education, employment) in the country as of 2025?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
4	Are homosexual relationships prohibited in the country (under criminal and/or administrative code or other legal document)?	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES
5	Have there been cases of people being prosecuted for homosexual relationships under these laws?	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES

№	Question text	AM	AZ	BE	GE	KZ	KY	MD	TJ	UA	UZ
6	If LGBTQI+ are not directly criminalised in your country, have there been cases of arrest or risk of arrest for belonging to LGBTQI+ or for homosexual relationships during 2024-2025? Have there been cases of LGBTQI+ charged for other criminal offenses, such as dissemination of pornography, vagrancy, hooliganism, disorderly conduct during 2024-2025?	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO
7	Does the country have any laws/policies related to intentional or unintentional HIV transmission, non-disclosure, or exposure?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
8	Is it legally required to do the HIV test before marriage as of 2025?	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES
9	Have there been cases of people prosecuted under these laws mentioned in questions #7-8 during 2024-2025?	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	N/A	NO	YES	NO	YES
10	Is sex work prohibited in the country (under criminal and/or administrative code or other legal document)?	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
11	Are there legal restrictions against clients of sex workers in the country (under criminal and/or administrative code or other legal document)?	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
12	Are there legal restrictions against third parties involved in sex work (managers, administrators, mamochkas) in the country (under criminal and/or administrative code or other legal document)?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
13	Are there legal restriction regarding the webcam in the country under criminal and/or administrative code or other legal document?	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
14	Have there been cases of people prosecuted under these laws mentioned in questions #10-13 during 2024-2025?	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES

№ Question text	AM	AZ	BE	GE	KZ	KY	MD	TJ	UA	UZ
15 Are there widespread repressive law enforcement practices against sex workers (e.g. police raids, test purchase, compulsory HIV/STI testing, requirement to show certificate of HIV/ STI testing, pressure to cooperate with police)?	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
16 Have there been verbal threats, physical attacks, enforced disappearances and assassination of activists from KPs?	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

6.1. Legal and policy context

PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS

Across all ten countries assessed, drug use in public places and possession of narcotic drugs remain subject to criminal or administrative sanctions. While legal frameworks differ, most countries apply a mixed liability model in which possession of small quantities is sanctioned under administrative law, while criminal penalties apply to larger amounts or repeat violations. In several jurisdictions – including Moldova and Ukraine – the threshold quantities for personal use are set very low, increasing the risk that people who use drugs may be criminalised even in the absence of intent to distribute. Similar mixed regimes operate in **Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and across Central Asia**⁵³.

Available data confirms that all ten countries maintain punitive frameworks that criminalise drug use and possession through low statutory thresholds and rapid escalation from administrative to criminal liability. In most jurisdictions, possession of minimal quantities for personal use is subject to fines or detention, while slightly higher amounts or repeated offences trigger criminal prosecution and imprisonment. These threshold-based systems function in practice as mechanisms of routine criminalisation rather than proportionate public health regulation, exposing people who use drugs to continuous legal risk even in the absence of trafficking-related conduct⁵⁴. For example, in Armenia, possession of up to five doses is treated as an administrative offence, while quantities above this threshold immediately trigger criminal liability, a structure mirrored across several EECA countries through similarly low dose- or quantity-based cut-offs.

53 For analysis of criminalisation of drug possession and its impact on HIV prevention and service access in the region, see, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). Eastern Europe and Central Asia — Regional profile — 2025 Global AIDS Update — AIDS, Crisis and the Power to Transform. Geneva; UNAIDS, 2025. <http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025-global-aids-update-eeca.pdf>;
Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA). Penalties for drug law offences in East Europe and Central Asia at a glance. Vilnius; EHRA, 31 March 2020. <https://harmreductioneurasia.org/drug-policy/drug-laws>.

54 A complete database is available at EHRA 2020, Ibid.

Narcological registries⁵⁵ continue to play a significant punitive role in several countries. In **Azerbaijan and Belarus**, inclusion in a state drug registry – which is typically mandatory and linked to law enforcement databases – can restrict a wide range of civil rights, including driving rights, access to certain professions and eligibility for public sector employment. Comparable registry systems exist in **Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan** where drug dependence is treated as a medical contraindication for the exercise of various civil rights and professional activities. Unlike voluntary health records, these registries function as mechanisms of surveillance and control, discouraging people who use drugs from seeking harm reduction services, testing or treatment⁵⁶.

Overall, punitive drug laws and related enforcement practices – including coerced drug testing, administrative detention and ongoing monitoring – continue to narrow civic space for people who use drugs and the organisations that support them. While country submissions did not document cases during the reporting period where drug laws were directly used to target activists or journalists, multiple independent media and human rights reports across the EECA region document cases in which journalists and civic activists have been prosecuted on drug-related charges, with credible allegations that narcotics were planted by law enforcement officers as a form of reprisal for their public activities⁵⁷.

LGBTQI+ COMMUNITIES

Uzbekistan remains the only country covered by this assessment⁵⁸ that criminalises consensual same-sex relations between men under Article 120 of the Criminal Code. According to the submission, the provision has been used to arrest and prosecute transgender women engaged in sex work – at least 14 trans women were reportedly convicted under this article in 2024. Those detained faced denial of humane treatment and discriminatory conditions in detention. This practice underscores the broad and punitive application of the law, effectively conflating sexual orientation, gender identity and sex work, resulting in severe violations of human rights and dignity.

55 Narcological (drug) registries are state-run databases maintained by public health or law enforcement authorities that record individuals diagnosed with drug dependence or identified as having used illicit substances. In many EECA countries, inclusion in such registries is mandatory following contact with medical services, police or courts and is often shared across government systems. Registration may trigger legal and administrative consequences, including restrictions on driving licenses, employment in certain professions, travel, and access to public services. Unlike confidential medical records, narcological registries function as instruments of monitoring and social control and are frequently cited as a deterrent to seeking voluntary treatment or harm-reduction services. To learn more, see EHRA 2020, Op.cit.

56 Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA). Drug Registry. Vilnius; EHRA, 2025. <https://harmreductioneurasia.org/drug-policy/drug-registry>

57 See, for instance: The Insider. Подброшенные наркотики, камера в спальне, сливы компроматов. Как киргизские власти пытаются избавиться от расследователя Болота Темирова (Planting drugs, a camera in the bedroom, leaking compromising information. How the Kyrgyz authorities are trying to get rid of investigator Bolot Temirov). 25 января 2022 (January 25, 2022). <https://theins.ru/news/248079> (in Russian); Sputnik News.

СК Армении представил подробности дела в отношении архиепископа Аршака Хачатряна (The Investigative Committee of Armenia presented details of the case against Archbishop Arshak Khachatryan). 5 December 2025.

<https://am.sputniknews.ru/20251205/sk-armenii-predstavil-podrobnosti-dela-v-otnoshenii-arkhiepiskopa-arshaka-khachatryana--96589976.html> (in Russian);

Али К. Азербайджанский активист Мамедзаде заявил о фальсификации дела. Кавказский Узел, 22 марта 2024 (Ali K. Azerbaijani activist Mammadzade claims the case was falsified. Caucasian Knot, March 22, 2024).

<https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/398327> (in Russian);

Amnesty International. Россиянин Антон Чечин получил самый большой срок среди участников протестов в Грузии. Его осудили за хранение наркотиков, которые, как он утверждает, ему подбросили. London; Amnesty International, 2 сентября 2025 (Amnesty International. Russian Anton Chechin received the longest sentence among the participants in the protests in Georgia. He was convicted of drug possession, which he claims was planted on him. London; Amnesty International, September 2, 2025). <https://www.amnesty.org/ru/latest/news/2025/09/rossiyanin-anton-chechin-poluchil-samyj-bolshoj-srok-sredi-uchastnikov-protestov-v-gruzii-ego-osudili-za-hranenie-narkotikov-kotorye-kak-on-utverzhdaet-emu-podbroshili/> (in Russian).

58 In the EECA region, the other country which criminalises consensual homosexual relations between men is Turkmenistan, but it is not covered by this project.

In the other nine countries, consensual same-sex relations are legal; however, this formal legality coexists with increasing state control over information, visibility and public discourse related to sexuality and gender which undermines safety and equal protection in practice.

At least five countries in the region (including Belarus, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan) have adopted – or actively enforce – laws or administrative provisions that regulate or restrict public information, media content and advocacy related to sexuality, gender and ‘non-traditional lifestyles’, creating indirect forms of exclusion that disproportionately affect LGBTQI+ communities.

Belarus stands out with the 2023 amendments commonly referred to as the ‘LGBT propaganda’ law which severely restrict public expression related to LGBTQI+ identities and creates a legal basis for authorities to pursue administrative or criminal charges under pre-existing provisions on pornography, “information harmful to children”, disorderly conduct, or hooliganism. **Kyrgyzstan** adopted a similar law in 2023 regulating information deemed harmful to children, with formulations broad enough to encompass content related to sexual orientation or gender identity, particularly in educational and online contexts. These measures are primarily structured as tools of information control and regulation of public discourse and have been widely applied against bloggers, journalists and independent media; impact on LGBTQI+ organisations, services and community visibility emerge as significant downstream consequences.

In **Azerbaijan**, although there is no law prohibiting LGBTQI+ ‘propaganda’, a 2019 regulation classifies “sexual preference disorder” as a condition incompatible with certain professions, including teaching, reinforcing institutional discrimination. Submissions from **Armenia and Georgia** describe repeated instances of violence against LGBTQI+ people and activists, alongside concerns about an inadequate state response, particularly in relation to prevention and accountability.

Taken together, these trends illustrate that morality-based legislation and information controls – originally framed to regulate public discourse and media – function in practice as barriers to expression, assembly and participation for LGBTQI+ communities despite the absence of explicit criminal bans.

PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV

Criminal provisions related to HIV transmission remain in force in all ten countries assessed, although their scope and application vary. **Armenia** criminalises HIV transmission but no longer criminalises HIV exposure; under Article 177 of the Criminal Code, criminal liability applies only where HIV is actually transmitted. This represents a partial shift toward international standards that discourage punishment for perceived risk alone.

The other countries of the region criminalise both HIV transmission and, to varying degrees, HIV exposure or ‘creating a risk’ of transmission. Within this broader group, **Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan** stand out due to the combination of broad legal formulations and documented enforcement. In these countries, criminal liability may be imposed for HIV exposure even in the absence of intent to transmit or actual harm. Belarus applies one of the broadest formulations in the region and, according to information provided in the submission, prosecutions have occurred for “creating a risk” of transmission even in the absence of actual harm.

Beyond enforcement, the structure of HIV criminalisation itself raises significant concerns across the region. As convictions are recorded under HIV-specific articles, criminal records can effectively disclose a person's HIV status, undermining confidentiality and privacy. This risk persists even where prosecutions are rare and contributes to fear of testing, disclosure and engagement with health services.

Several countries of the region, namely **Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova**, provide for a waiver of criminal liability in cases of HIV exposure where the person living with HIV informed their partner of their HIV-positive status and the partner knowingly accepted the risk of transmission. This provision has reduced criminalisation in some serodiscordant relationships. However, it has not resolved the broader harms associated with HIV-specific criminalisation, including the burden placed on disclosure, evidentiary imbalances and continued stigma.

Another example of an important positive step has been observed in **Tajikistan**. In December 2023, the Supreme Court of Tajikistan adopted a Resolution of the Plenum on adjudicating criminal cases related to HIV exposure and transmission⁵⁹, providing guidance aimed at reducing unnecessary criminalisation. The Resolution emphasises proportionality, evidentiary standards and the need to distinguish between actual harm and theoretical risk. While the Resolution does not repeal criminal provisions and does not eliminate HIV-specific criminalisation, it represents the only known judicial initiative in the region to limit the overbroad application of HIV criminal law. Submissions and international monitoring note that its practical impact will depend on consistent implementation by lower courts.

Mandatory premarital HIV testing remains in force in several countries, including **Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan**. While framed as a public health measure, mandatory testing contradicts international standards of voluntary informed consent and confidentiality and further reinforces stigma toward people living with HIV. In contexts where religious marriages⁶⁰ are increasingly common, this requirement may also create incentives for some couples to avoid civil marriage altogether, which can increase legal, health and social vulnerabilities – particularly for women – by limiting access to spousal rights, social protections and formal mechanisms of support.

SEX WORKERS

Sex work is not recognised as work in any of the ten countries assessed and is regulated through punitive legal and administrative frameworks across the region. While the legal treatment of individuals selling sex varies, all ten countries criminalise third party involvement in sex work, including organising, facilitating or profiting from the sale of sexual services. In most countries,

59 ПОСТАНОВЛЕНИЕ Пленума Верховного Суда Республики Таджикистан №2. О судебной практике по уголовным делам, связанным с заражением вирусом иммунодефицита человека. Душанбе, от 26 декабря 2023 года (RESOLUTION of the Plenum of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 2. On judicial practice in criminal cases related to human immunodeficiency virus infection. Dushanbe, as of December 26, 2023). https://sud.tj/upload/documents/plenum/2_UD.RU/39.%20Постановление%20Пленума%20Верховного%20Суда%20от%2023.12.2023%20№2.pdf (in Russian).

60 In several EECA countries, couples may enter into a religious marriage ceremony (for example, a nikah conducted in a mosque) that is not formally registered with civil authorities and therefore does not require compliance with premarital HIV testing or other civil requirements. While socially recognised, such unions do not provide the legal protections associated with civil marriage, including spousal rights, inheritance, social benefits and formal mechanisms of protection in cases of divorce or violence.

selling sex itself is subject to administrative liability (except Kazakhstan, where sex work is neither an administrative nor a criminal offense). This regulatory model operates, with variations, in **Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Uzbekistan and across Central Asia.**

Although the precise scope and intensity of enforcement differs by country, submissions consistently indicate that these frameworks create structural criminalisation of sex work as a sector, even in contexts where selling sex is not formally criminalised. By targeting surrounding activities – such as renting premises, organising work, advertising services or providing security – the law effectively renders safe and stable working conditions impossible and exposes sex workers to constant risk of police intervention.

CASE BOX 4

Ukraine – Indirect Criminalisation of Sex Work through Pornography Laws (2024)

In 2024, Ukrainian law enforcement authorities initiated criminal proceedings against a webcam studio operating in Kharkiv, illustrating how general morality-based criminal provisions are used to indirectly criminalise sex work.

Between June 2023 and October 2024, the studio operated from two apartments, employing women as webcam models with administrative support staff. In April 2024, police conducted seven controlled 'test purchases' of online sexual services, spending approximately UAH 15,000 (approximately USD500). Based on this evidence, a criminal case was opened under Article 301 of the Criminal Code ('distribution of pornographic materials') and in October 2024 charges were brought against the organiser and one model.

Civil society organisations documented concerns regarding disproportionate law enforcement tactics, lack of clear legal distinctions between consensual adult online work and criminalised content, and the chilling effect on the safety and access to services by sex workers. The case reinforced stigma, increased fear of prosecution, and discouraged engagement with health, legal and support programmes, highlighting how indirect criminalisation undermines civic space for sex workers and community-led responses.

For sex workers, this environment results in persistent uncertainty, vulnerability and exposure to abuse. Penalties include fines, administrative detention and repeated police harassment, while enforcement practices documented in submissions include raids, compulsory HIV or STI testing, pressure to cooperate with law enforcement authorities and informal extortion.

Community led organisations providing HIV prevention, harm reduction and rights-based services to sex workers operate under similar constraints. Outreach activities, peer education and drop-in services may be interpreted as 'facilitation' of sex work or otherwise attract law enforcement

attention, exposing both staff and clients to surveillance or sanctions. As a result, organisations report limiting outreach locations, reducing visibility and adapting service models to minimise risk, often at the expense of accessibility, trust and continuity of care.

PROTECTION FROM REPRISAL

Across all ten countries, broader assessments of civic space document persistent gaps in state protection for civil society actors, including human rights defenders, journalists and activists, particularly in contexts characterised by restricted or obstructed civic space. Global monitoring initiatives, such as the CIVICUS Monitor, consistently report patterns of intimidation, harassment and insufficient protection for civil society, especially where advocacy challenges dominant political, moral or social narratives⁶¹.

Within this broader context, recurring and often aggravated protection gaps are reported affecting CSOs and activists working with LGBTQI+ communities, sex workers, people who use drugs and people living with HIV. These include delayed or ineffective investigations, lack of follow-up by law enforcement, and situations in which victims were discouraged from seeking justice or engaging with police. The cumulative effect of these shortcomings is a heightened climate of fear for organisations working with marginalised communities, discouraging public participation and visibility.

Patterns of reprisal vary across the region. In **Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine**, respondents highlighted incidents of hate-motivated violence against LGBTQI+ individuals, alongside concerns about slow or inadequate investigations. **Belarus and several Central Asian countries** reported continued use of administrative tools – such as identity checks, detentions and fines – that can be applied selectively against marginalised groups, including as a response to public visibility or rights-based advocacy. In contexts where criminalisation remains strong (notably in relation to HIV exposure and drug use), individuals may also fear punitive consequences when reporting crimes or accessing services.

CASE BOX 5

Ukraine – Assault on LGBTQI+ Activists at a Public Gathering (2025)

On 18 August 2025, during a public funeral ceremony in Kyiv for artist David Chichkan, two LGBTQI+ activists were physically assaulted after displaying rainbow flags. The attackers were reportedly affiliated with a volunteer military unit. Witnesses reported that the assailants tore the flags and struck the activists in front of other participants.

61 CIVICUS Monitor 2025, Op.cit..

Police officers intervened to separate the parties but made no immediate arrests. Although a formal complaint was filed, no effective investigation followed and no perpetrators were held accountable as of late 2025. Law enforcement authorities reportedly cited the “sensitive nature” of the event and the military affiliation of those involved as factors limiting further action.

This case illustrates a failure of state protection and accountability in response to targeted violence against LGBTQI+ individuals. Despite the absence of formal criminalisation of same-sex relations in Ukraine, the lack of an effective response contributes to a climate of impunity and insecurity. CSOs reported that the incident had a deterrent effect on public visibility and participation, with some community-led initiatives subsequently cancelling or relocating activities due to concerns about safety and lack of effective protection.

Similar patterns of delayed investigation and limited accountability were also reported in other countries, reinforcing concerns that weak protection from reprisal remains a cross-cutting constraint on civic participation for key populations.

6.2. Implications for community-led HIV/TB responses

Across the region, criminalisation and inadequate protection mechanisms have direct and compounding consequences for HIV and TB responses. People who use drugs avoid treatment or harm reduction services due to fears associated with drug registries, surveillance and police attention. Sex workers and LGBTQI+ persons may refrain from seeking healthcare, reporting violence or engaging with outreach services because of concerns about stigma, exposure, intimidation or potential legal repercussions.

Combined with uneven state protection, these legal and practical barriers reduce the visibility, safety and operational space for community-led organisations. Submissions indicate that the cumulative effect of criminalisation, information controls, administrative pressure and weak accountability mechanisms undermines trust between communities and service providers, disrupts continuity of care and limits the ability of organisations to reach those most in need. Over time, these constraints weaken community-led HIV and TB responses and erode the sustainability of rights-based prevention, testing and treatment services for key populations.

The cumulative effect of criminalisation, information controls, administrative pressure and weak accountability mechanisms undermines trust between communities and service providers, disrupts continuity of care and limits the ability of organisations to reach those most in need. Over time, these constraints weaken community-led HIV and TB responses and erode the sustainability of rights-based prevention, testing and treatment services for key populations.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The analysis of legal frameworks, enforcement practices and documented incidents in Eastern Europe and Central Asia reveals a region where civic space remains uneven, fragile and increasingly shaped by political and ideological pressures, particularly affecting organisations led by and working with people living with HIV and key populations. While formal guarantees of fundamental freedoms exist in all ten countries, their practical enjoyment is compromised by restrictive legislation, administrative barriers, selective enforcement and inadequate protection from violence and reprisal. These dynamics have direct consequences for the sustainability of community-led HIV and TB responses.

Freedom of association is affected by the expansion of foreign agent or foreign influence frameworks, most notably in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, and by long-standing restrictive practices in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan where registration, reporting and funding requirements function in ways that limit organisational independence despite the absence of formally designated 'foreign agent' laws. Even in contexts without such legislation, opaque registration procedures, restrictions on access to foreign funding and fear of reprisals continue to undermine the operational security of organisations working with people who use drugs, LGBTQI+ communities, sex workers, migrants and people living with HIV. In 2025, these factors continued to complicate the operation of community-led and civil society organisations and to limit their ability to provide services and conduct research and advocacy for people living with HIV and key populations.

Freedom of peaceful assembly is formally recognised in most national constitutions, yet, in practice, marginalised groups face heightened safety risks and uneven protection. Violence against LGBTQI+ communities during public events in Armenia and Ukraine illustrates persistent gaps in state protection even in relatively open civic environments. In Central Asia, assemblies on sensitive issues seldom occur due to fears of official backlash and social hostility, effectively reducing public participation without the need for explicit bans.

Freedom of expression and access to information is increasingly constrained through 'anti-propaganda', 'family values', child protection and public morality frameworks. These include restrictions targeting drug-related information (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and under consideration in Ukraine), LGBTQI+ visibility (Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and subnationally in Moldova), and independent educational or advocacy activity (Uzbekistan). The cumulative effect of these measures is a chilling environment in which community-led organisations self-censor to avoid legal, administrative or reputational risks, limiting access to accurate evidence-based health information.

Criminalisation of key populations remains entrenched in all ten countries. Punitive drug policy, administrative or criminal liability related to sex work, and HIV exposure and transmission laws continue to shape the risk environment for individuals and the organisations that support them. Apart from Uzbekistan, none of the remaining nine countries criminalise same-sex relations, but indirect criminalisation through morality or 'family values' legislation places LGBTQI+ communities at heightened risk, particularly when combined with enforcement practices that lack transparency or proportionality.

Finally, **protection from reprisal** remains inconsistent. Documented incidents in Armenia and Ukraine demonstrate persistent targeted violence against LGBTQI+ individuals and the inadequacy of investigative responses. Several submissions describe a climate in which reporting violence or discrimination is discouraged by stigma, fear of retaliation or doubts about the impartiality of authorities. This undermines access to justice, weakens trust in public institutions and discourages engagement with essential health services.

Taken together, these findings confirm that civic space restrictions do not operate in isolation, but intersect and reinforce structural disadvantages faced by key populations. As a result, community-led responses across the region operate within narrow margins of safety, visibility and legitimacy, threatening both their immediate service delivery and long-term sustainability.

At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that community-led organisations across the region have not remained passive in the face of shrinking civic space. Through adaptive service delivery, community-led monitoring, coalition building, strategic litigation and engagement with international human rights mechanisms, communities continue to assert rights, document harms and influence policy processes despite increasing constraints. These responses highlight both the resilience of community-led movements and the importance of sustained support for evidence-based advocacy in restrictive environments.

Community-led organisations across the region have not remained passive in the face of shrinking civic space – through adaptive service delivery, community-led monitoring, coalition-building, strategic litigation and engagement with international human-rights mechanisms – as communities continue to assert rights, document harms and influence policy processes despite increasing constraints. These responses highlight both the resilience of community-led movements and the importance of sustained support for evidence-based advocacy in restrictive environments.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings and conclusions, the following recommendations target three distinct groups of stakeholders: national governments, international and regional partners, and civil society and community-led organisations. These recommendations reflect a regional perspective and should be adapted to national contexts through consultation with people living with HIV and key populations.

TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

- **Strengthen protection of fundamental freedoms:** Governments should revise or repeal legislation that unduly restricts the freedoms of association, assembly and expression, including foreign agent regulations, 'anti-propaganda' provisions and child protection rules that censor legitimate health and rights information. Compliance with international human rights obligations and standards should be ensured;
- **Ensure proportionality and legal certainty:** Vague legal terms – such as 'propaganda', 'harm to children', 'public morality' or 'political activity' – should be reviewed and amended to prevent arbitrary or discriminatory enforcement;
- **Guarantee the safety of marginalised communities during public events:** Law enforcement bodies should be mandated and trained to proactively prevent violence against LGBTQI+ communities, people who use drugs, sex workers and other marginalised groups during assemblies. Investigations into attacks should be timely, impartial and effective;
- **Eliminate punitive barriers to health services:** Governments should move away from punitive drug registries, criminal and administrative sanctions for individual sex work and HIV transmission/exposure laws that contradict international guidance. Public health strategies should prioritise voluntary, confidential and evidence-based interventions;
- **Protect the independence of civil society:** Registration of community-led organisations should be streamlined and free from discriminatory practices. Administrative inspections should be transparent and grounded in legitimate regulatory objectives, not used as tools of pressure or intimidation;
- **Strengthen domestic financing for HIV and key population services:** Governments should plan for and progressively increase domestic funding for HIV prevention, treatment and community-led services for key populations, ensuring that transitions from international funding do not result in service disruptions or exclusion;
- **Recognise sensitivities and particular vulnerabilities of community-led and civil society organisations working on HIV and key populations:** Governments should recognise that organisations led by and working with people living with HIV and key populations operate in contexts of heightened sensitivity and risk. This warrants dialogue, cooperation and targeted protective measures, rather than regulatory or administrative practices that restrict operations or undermine access to life-saving services for marginalised communities;

- **Safeguard digital civic space:** Governments should ensure that regulation of online content, education and communication does not unduly restrict access to evidence-based health information, digital advocacy or secure communication by civil society and community-led organisations.

TO INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL PARTNERS, INCLUDING DONORS

- **Sustain support for community-led and civil society organisations:** Funding should prioritise organisations serving key populations, including those operating in restrictive environments. Core funding and long-term institutional support remain essential for stability and resilience;
- **Adapt their expectations and funding modalities to the priorities and realities of community-led and civil society organisations:** Funding mechanisms should include safe and flexible sub-granting mechanisms, adjusting reporting and visibility requirements, and recognising that certain forms of advocacy may not be feasible in controlled or repressive environments;
- **Integrate civic space monitoring into health programming:** Regional and global partners, including the Global Fund, UNAIDS and WHO, should incorporate civic space indicators into programmatic oversight and technical assistance, recognising that narrowing civic space directly affects service access and continuity;
- **Support community-led monitoring and accountability mechanisms:** Donors and partners should fund and institutionalise community-led monitoring of rights violations, service barriers and enforcement practices as core components of HIV and TB programmes, ensuring that community generated evidence informs policy dialogue and programmatic decision-making;
- **Provide technical assistance on legal and policy reform:** International partners should support governments and civil society to align national legislation with international human rights norms, including conducting legal environment assessments, facilitating dialogue and offering capacity building for justice and law enforcement institutions; and,
- **Support digital security and safety:** Given the rise in online censorship and control over digital educational activities, donors should invest in digital security training and safe communication tools for community-led organisations and activists.

TO CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY-LED ORGANISATIONS

- **Strengthen collective advocacy and cross-movement alliances where space allows:** Given the overlapping restrictions across key population groups, coalitions between LGBTQI+ organisations, harm reduction networks, feminist groups, sex-worker organisations and human rights defenders help build resilience and visibility;
- **Preserve and rebuild coordination and trust in restrictive environments:** Where open coalitions are no longer safe, organisations should invest in trusted informal networks, joint

learning spaces and discreet collaboration mechanisms to prevent fragmentation of community platforms and to sustain solidarity across movements;

- **Enhance documentation of rights violations:** Systematic collection of evidence on violence, discrimination, arbitrary enforcement and administrative barriers strengthens both national advocacy and regional reporting. Partnerships with legal aid groups and independent media are essential;
- **Invest in safety planning and digital protection:** Community-led organisations should integrate safety protocols, digital security practices and risk mitigation strategies into their daily operations, especially when working in restrictive environments or online spaces;
- **Engage in strategic litigation and legal empowerment:** Where feasible and safe, organisations should pursue test cases, constitutional challenges or appeals to international bodies to challenge discriminatory laws and practices. Training on legal literacy can empower community members to know and assert their rights;
- **Maintain constructive dialogue with authorities where possible:** Even in restrictive settings, engagement with local authorities, municipal bodies or specialised ministries (health, labour, social protection) can help maintain space for service delivery and reduce risk to organisations working with key populations;
- **Protect continuity of community-led services where explicit advocacy is constrained:** Organisations that have scaled down public advocacy should prioritise sustaining essential health, harm reduction, psychosocial and peer support services, while embedding rights-based approaches into less visible forms of engagement; and,
- **Reframe community empowerment for shrinking civic space:** Empowerment strategies should expand beyond public mobilisation to include peer leadership development, community resilience, mutual support systems and localised problem-solving, ensuring communities remain organised and engaged even under restrictive conditions.



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