HACKING
WITH CIVIL SOCIETY:

A Guide for Hackathon Organisers

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility – Regional Actions was an EU-funded Project working with the six EaP countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) to promote the role of civil society actors in reforms taking place in their countries. The Project was funded by the European Union and implemented by a consortium led by GDSI Limited (Ireland). The Project ran from 2017 until 2021 and included the organisation of annual hackathons for civil society. This publication is based on the experience of the project team in organising the annual EaP Civil Society Hackathons.

Table of Contents

EaP | Eastern Partnership

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP CIVIL SOCIETY FACILITY

GDSI
Delivering Sustainable Solutions

Foreword

Although many hackathons are related to STEM industries, they do not follow the beautiful universal math rules. There is no – and there cannot be – a universal one-size-fits-all approach, or a miracle formula, to organise a flawless event. Even if you make your living from organising hackathons, each of your events will be unique, and will bring new challenges, battles, achievements and experiences.

This Guide contains a lot of the lessons that we – the team of the European Union's 'Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility' project – have learnt from organizing our annual hackathons for civil society actors from the Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia Moldova and Ukraine) in 2017-2020, and some useful tricks we picked up from our hackathon mentors, participants and the hackathon community around the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the arguably inevitable process of digitalisation and brought many activities online – including hackathons. While this format change did have an impact on the logistical side of hackathon events as well as the core processes, concerns and preparatory steps remain the same for offline and online hackathons. In this Guide, we aim to cover the key aspects of organising a hackathon for and with civil society activists, keeping in mind both formats and referring to a specific format when it requires an utterly different implementation approach.

We would be happy to receive your feedback on the Guide, your personal stories of organising or participating in hackathons, or tips for the hackathon organisers, at NEAR-civilsociety@ec.europa.eu

Pre-Hackathon Research: Is It Important?
In short: Yes, and how!

Let's start with the definition of a hackathon. Google will offer you a variety of definitions, but we can offer ours, which is based on Joshua Tauberer' *guide*:

A hackathon is a competition-like event of any duration where people work in teams of 2+ individuals to solve some predefined problem(s), or challenge, with the help of external experts (mentors).

This definition gives us several insights:

- There will be several types of attendees – organizers, team members and mentors at the very least – but at the heart of the event is the actual participants, or 'hackers'.
- Like any competition, a hackathon is subject specific, governed by rules and involves winners and prizes for champions, be those monetary or not.

Your target audience (i.e. participants) defines your realm of possibilities, limitations and red flags. Some 'classic' hackathon features – such as having MVPs at the end of your event, narrowing the hackathon theme, building hack teams spontaneously, or coding all night long – might not work when your key audience are non-tech-savvy civil society activists.

Does it mean that there can be no hackathons for activists? Of course, not! People from the non-profit sector have a better understanding of societal and community problems, needs and potential solutions. They look beyond technologies, concentrating on the goal ahead and changes they hope to achieve. Mix them with the right people from the tech side – and you could have amazing results.

EaP | Eastern Partnership

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP
CIVIL SOCIETY FACILITY

GDSI
Delivering Sustainable Solutions

Civil society in each country is unique: activists have different knowledge, have been exposed to different technologies, and have different experience of working in new formats. So, before you decide on running a civil society hackathon, learn as much as you can about your potential participants by carrying out a small desk research and a couple of interviews.

! TIP

Most of these questions cover the targeted society at large, as from our experience, civil society trends just mirror the general trends in society.

Try to answer the questions below. This small research will help you with the first steps in organising your hackathon for civil society actors – finding a purpose and topic where the civil society can contribute most.

Questions to ask

In general, is the target country digitally advanced? What apps and products are the most popular? How deep is the gap between the digital habits of those living in the cities and the countryside?

How good are its e-Government and e-Services? Do citizens generally use online services, or still prefer offline interaction?

What is the situation with open data in the country? How many useful datasets are available? What are the most successful IT products reusing open data?

What are the most widely used digital products created by CSOs or volunteers in the country? Try to meet and talk to those civic tech leaders.

Have there been hackathons for civil society in the past in the country? Who organized them, how many participants attended, and what were the outcomes and results.

Reason to ask

You cannot expect ideas for chatbots from someone who has never used chatbots.

E-Petitions, e-Addresses and e-Requests are the most popular services proposed by civil society representative at hackathons.

Civic tech products with 'watchdog' functions need access (API[1]) to state registries on budget spending and public tenders.

Look for the format and types of services they offer to their end users.

Try to find some 'survivors' – projects and their authors – and check what happened to them after the hackathon.

[1]An application programming interface (API) is a computing interface that defines interactions between multiple software intermediaries. It defines the kinds of calls or requests that can be made, how to make them, the data formats that should be used, the conventions to follow, etc.

EaP | Eastern Partnership

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP CIVIL SOCIETY FACILITY

GDSI
Delivering Sustainable Solutions

Hackathon Cycle

Organising a **Hackathon**

12 After the Event

11 Run Your Hackathon

10 Prepare for the Hackathon

09 Select Participants

08 Gather the Mentors & Build the Agenda

07 Launch & Promote the Call

01 Agree on the Concept

02 Create the Schedule & Estimate Your Budget

03 Define the Rules

04 Create a Team

05 Secure a Venue

06 Establish the Webpage
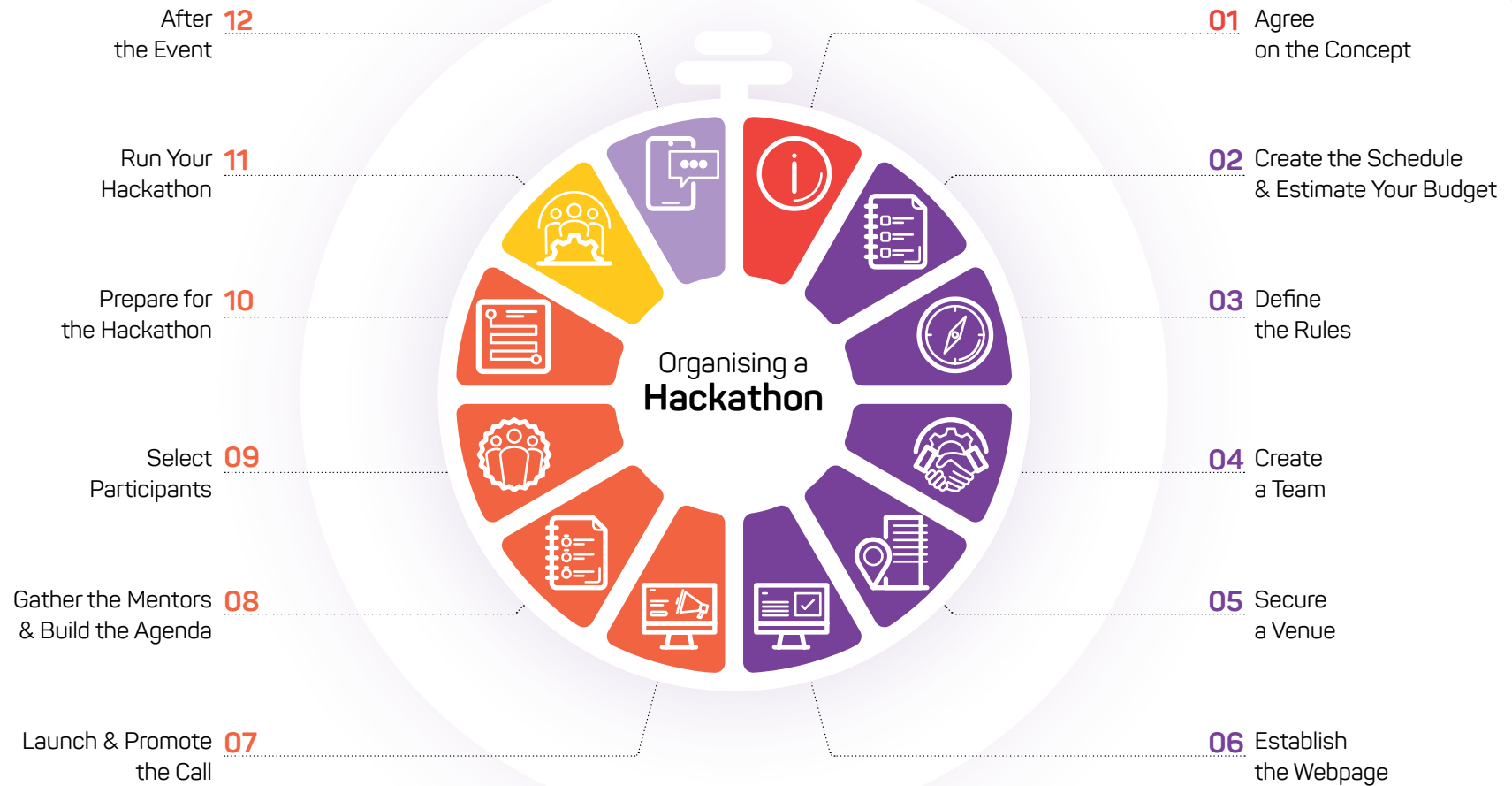
01. Agree on the Concept

Once the purpose and topic – 'WHY' of the event – are defined, the next step should be a clear vision of your hackathon shared by all interested parties. It is best described through a simple question: **What do we want to have at the end of the event?**

But try to answer this question on the spot – and you will see how many discussions and arguments you will end up with!

So, what do we want to have at the end of our event? Let's break this question into parts – and address each element separately.

WHAT are the immediate deliverables of any hackathon. Those times when hackathons were exclusively about coding a piece of software are long gone. Today's hackathons are often about boosting creativity, getting new ideas, testing concepts, producing non-digital products or even hiring talent! Getting a clear 'WHAT' is fundamental to deciding later on the participants, mentors, agenda, timing and even prizes!

Another aspect worth agreeing with the stakeholders in advance is the target participants. Traditionally, participation in hackathons is open to individuals and teams. Ideation, building actual hack teams and selecting team leaders mostly happen during the hackathon event, often after the first pitches. Organising hackathons for civil society means we want to have solutions coming from civic activists who often lack technical knowledge and skills to fully implement them. So, if at the end of the event you want to have some ready-for-development prototypes, you will need to have hack teams with the skills allowing them to create those products within 48 or 72 hours.

For instance, if you expect teams to present prototypes of IT solutions proposed by civil society activists for the hackathon, each hack team will need to have at least three technical experts: a backend developer to write the server part of a solution, a designer to come up with the interface and visual elements, and a frontend developer to convert this design into code. The more technically advanced the hackathon deliverables are, the more technical experts you will need to have in each hack team.

TIP

The digital competences of your participants and completeness of the deliverables have a positive correlation: the more advanced your participants are, the more technical and specific your outputs will be.
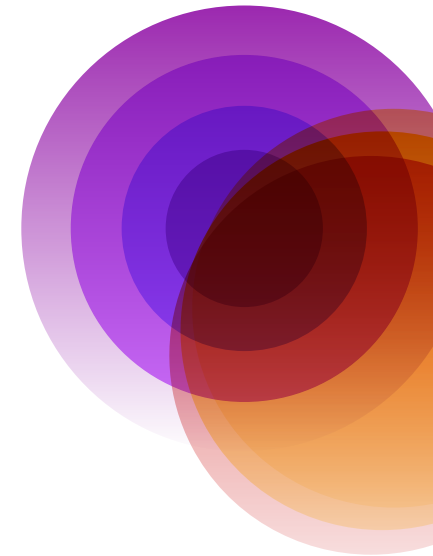
EaP | Eastern Partnership

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP CIVIL SOCIETY FACILITY

GDSI
Delivering Sustainable Solutions

WE: write down all stakeholders – groups or organisations with a potential strong interest in the upcoming event and its outputs. These can be your direct management, donors, relevant governmental agencies, challenge owners, companies or organisations you expect might take up some of the solutions proposed by the hackathon participants… Try to get them together for at least one meeting before you start working on a concept. It doesn't have to be a face-to-face meeting (a virtual gathering can work as well). In case it is not possible, get as much of their expectations and vision as you can.

WANT TO HAVE is about the incentives offered to the participants, first of all the hackathon winners. The more you expect as hackathon deliverables, the more attractive and relevant to the challenges your 'carrot' should be: good seed-funding is more appreciated by start-ups than mentoring opportunities, and a paid internship can be a great prize at students' hackathons.

! TIP

Monetary prizes always attract more participants with ideas. You might consider a multistage selection process, for instance, asking shortlisted applicants to pitch their ideas to mentors first, and selecting only a certain number of ideas for the hackathon itself. As for the developers, designers and mentors, you should strive to build trust and a good reputation within those communities, including by offering the right kind of financial and non-financial incentives.

EaP | Eastern Partnership

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP CIVIL SOCIETY FACILITY

GDSI
Delivering Sustainable Solutions

TIP

You may also consider hybrid hackathons that start online with first pitches, teams' brainstorming and some useful webinars with mentors, and finish at real-life events. Or organise smaller offline meetups and mentor-facilitated sessions within multi-country online hackathons.

AT THE END requires you to decide on how the winners will be selected. Who has the right to say what solution was the best - you, the organisers, donors or sponsors, mentors, jury board, all participants or should you go for a mixed approach (taking into account the feedback of different stakeholders, assigning different weighting)? How many winners will you select? Will it be by vote, evaluation or discussion? Will you select the winners on the spot, or just a number of top-scoring projects that will be invited to apply for funding? There is no single right answer.

Finally, **EVENT** is about the format, process & timing of your hackathon. Traditionally, hackathons were purely physical events which took place over a period of 24 to 27 hours, but 2020 made the entire world reconsider and reinvent all event formats. Like many other activities, hackathons went online. Both platforms have pros and cons: online hackathons are more inclusive and cheaper to organise, but they tend to last longer and – as our 2020 Online Hackathon participants noted – miss the hackathon spirit and the capacity to build long-lasting connections. Besides, staying focused for weeks on end on the team and project is tough for online hackathon participants – and a challenge to organisers. And don't forget to agree on the selection process of the hackathon participants and the dates!

Got the common vision? Put it on paper (concept) and share with the stakeholders once again!

OUR STORY

For our EaP Civil Society Hackathons, we decided on a mixed approach: participants and mentors evaluated the projects, and the three top-scoring teams, based on the highest average scores (two based on the public vote and one on the mentors' vote) were invited to submit an extended application for seed funding. The hackathon winner was selected based on independent evaluations of the applications by experts. This helped us keep the balance between social relevance, impact and projects' technical feasibility.

EaP | Eastern Partnership

02. Set Out the Schedule & Estimate Your Budget

In preparing for our hackathons, we used a reverse planning approach: we listed all the main stages of our hackathon, and started from the day of the event. In some cases, we even started with the deadline by which the winning project must have been launched!

To make your life easier, we have listed the main stages from our offline EaP Civil Society Hackathons, and the time we needed for each stage. We had a more complex scenario — there was an additional stage for selecting ideas for the hackathon, for pre-selected applicants to work on their ideas and pitch their ideas to mentors. This is how we did it:

- Call for applications for ideas for digital solutions (at least 3 weeks) and call for applications among individual technical experts (at least 5 weeks).
- Evaluating and pre-selecting ideas for the ideathon (at least 1 week)
- Ideathon: live pitches to mentors and final selection of ideas for the hackathon (2 days).
- Evaluating applications from technical experts, selecting and confirming participants (1 week).
- Delivering a 3-day offline hackathon, voting & nominating projects for support (3 days).
- Restricted call for applications among the nominees and selection the winner(s) (at least 6 weeks).
- Developing and launching the winning project (6 months).

OUR STORY

When we noticed that mentors spent most of the time with the activists discussing and reshaping their ideas of digital solutions, we introduced a special activity for them called Ideathon. It is an incubation meeting of the authors of the shortlisted ideas of digital solutions and the Ideathon mentors, where the applicants present their ideas to the mentors and further develop them with the mentors' help. At the end of the Ideathon, they pitch their improved ideas to the mentors and the organisers, who then select the ideas for participation in the actual hackathon.

This list does not include the preparation stage, but you might need 4-6 weeks to prepare for launching the call or opening the registration. The time needed for each stage is indicative as it will depend on a number of factors, from the extent to which hackathons are known to civil society actors in your country to the complexity of your decision making process and the number of people involved in the entire process (for example, in our case, we needed to take into account the approval needed from EU institutions).

You might also want to reserve some time between the stages (leave a 'buffer'), in case you need to prolong the call to get more applications, organise participants' logistics, especially for multi-country events, or even to substitute selected participants with someone from the reserve list. But be careful not to extend too far: the longer the time between the launch of the call and the actual hackathon, the higher the chances for last-minute participants' drop-off or no-show.

If you ever organised an event, online or offline, you will see that a Hackathon **budget** is not all that different. However, here are some more specific expenses you might want to include in your budget (see Section 10 of the Guide for more ideas):

- professional accounts for the software you might use before, during and after the event, for online meetings & webinars, communication with participants and collecting feedback.
- back-up hardware, like extension cables, adaptors, standard-sized batteries, a wi-fi amplifier, a reserve wi-fi router and an additional hotspot, like a mobile wi-fi router.
- if you expect digital solutions as the immediate deliverables of your hackathon, a development server that the hack teams can use for temporarily hosting their projects.
- a never-empty drinks & snacks stand with water, tea, coffee, soft drinks, energy bars, cookies, etc. is standard for offline hackathons.

TIPS

Deciding on the hackathon dates consider major events in the hosting country, holidays and vacation season. Most hackathons start on Friday afternoon or Saturday, and take place over the weekend, which allows for the participation of students or full-time employed technical experts.

To better estimate your budget, ask potential service providers for price quotes in advance and check with your colleagues and even friends who might have been through similar experiences.

03. Define the Rules

The adjusted concept will become the canvas for the hackathon's rules – the North Star for the organising team, applicants, participants, mentors, judges and even communication officers.

There is no universal template for the hackathon rules. Unlike the concept, the hackathon rules (we call them guidelines for applicants) are written for an external audience, so they shall address as many of the concerns and fears of your potential participants as possible.

Try to be transparent and make sure you can answer these questions:

1. When and where / in what format will the hackathon take place?
2. What is its purpose, i.e. what large scale problem is it trying to solve, and what is the reason to participate?
3. Who organises the hackathon and what is their interest?
4. How can we help solve this problem, i.e. what types of solutions (deliverables) do you expect from the participants at the end?
5. What is the specific topic (or topics) the hackathon-born solutions shall address?
6. Who can participate in the hackathon? Teams, individuals or both? With what technical background and skills? From what country or countries? Are there any age requirements?
7. What is the participants' personal interest in taking part? What will participants get at the end (benefits and incentives)?
8. How can one apply? Where? Do applicants need to have a team or idea of a solution to apply? How detailed should the description of the proposed idea be?
9. How will the participants be selected?
10. How will the hackathon be organised?
11. Who will select the winner(s) and how? How and when will winners get their prize? What are the conditions for the winners? What about intellectual property rights?

Google some hackathons for their rules, – or explore our own *guidelines* for 2017-2020 hackathon participants!

If your future participants are not experienced with hackathons, start your rules with explaining what a hackathon is.

If your hackathon rules become too lengthy, try to create a graphic representation of the key information (for example by producing an infographic).

Information on the actual hackathon process is especially important for non-experienced participants, particularly in the case of less common hackathon formats, such as online and hybrid hackathons, or using a multi-stage selections process.

04.   Create a Team

No great events were ever possible without exceptional organising teams behind them, and hackathons are no exception. Hackathon organising teams may vary greatly in terms of number of team members.

TIP

If the task of working with mentors, speakers and jury members is assigned mainly to the hackathon coordinator, break it into parts and subdivide between other team members.

For small teams with limited human resources, you may consider our approach, i.e. distributing the key tasks between our Project Team members:

- **overall coordination** of the hackathon process. Ideally, you should have one person in the team who 'owns' the whole process and is responsible for the final outcome of the hackathon. Our Hackathons Coordinator was in-charge of all the happenings in and around our EaP Civil Society Hackathons. This person should have a very clear understanding of the status at any point in time, ensure that preparatory work is on track, understand the pre-requisites for the next steps, collaborate with all other team members involved in the process and propose and implement any changes that may be needed along the way.
- **working with mentors, speakers and jury members.** It comes as a separate and time-consuming task essential for building an engaging hackathon agenda and first-class experience for participants. Based on the hackathon topic and the participants' profile, this person will need to identify and contact potential mentors and speakers, agree with them on their role, level of engagement, conditions and remuneration, check their materials and then become their 'best friend' at least for the duration of the hackathon, supporting them on various administrative and logistical issues at all stages.

OUR STORY

Our Hackathons Coordinator is also in charge of what happens after the hackathon, making sure that the winners receive their prizes and the winning solutions are launched. This includes monitoring the development of the winning solutions, supporting and advising the teams, promoting the launched solutions and their authors, checking on their progress – and many other things!

EaP | Eastern Partnership

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP CIVIL SOCIETY FACILITY

GDSI
Delivering Sustainable Solutions

- **participants' helpdesk** that often starts with questions from applicants and ends with the participants' feedback survey. The person in charge of this element will also coordinate volunteers at the offline event and be the first point of contact for all participants. Do not underestimate this role: participants' experience is usually the thing that can make or break your hackathon.
- **communication and promotion,** starting with developing your hackathon website or page, but also deciding and implementing the promotion and marketing strategy, developing your hackathon visual identity and branded promo materials, handling social media and working with newsrooms and reporters
- **logistics,** such as searching and booking the venue, travel and accommodation arrangements, preparing participants' guide, organising networking activities, ordering equipment, promo items and prizes, food and other essentials for the event etc.
- **technical support,** from setting up and/or supporting the webpage and application form, to checking the equipment at the venue, hosting webinars, administrating any voting app you may want to use, etc.
- **contractual and financial** tasks related with the contracts and payments to vendors, service providers and hired experts.
- **quality assurance and coordinating with stakeholders.** Having a designated person from your organisation's management team to have a final look at the key documents and handle any approvals by relevant stakeholders (such as donors) is crucial.

Now, when the master plan is ready and everyone knows what to do, it's time to act!

! TIP

Whether you are local or new to a country (or region), try to get at least one local partner, or ambassador, per hackathon target country, to help you with the promotion of the call, search for mentors and logistics on the ground.

You will need to have a professional communication and PR expert in your team. But spoiler alert: Every team member will have to communicate and be engaged in promotion!

EaP | Eastern Partnership

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP CIVIL SOCIETY FACILITY

GDSI
Delivering Sustainable Solutions

05. Secure a Venue
(if applicable)

Unlike other in-person events, finding the ideal venue for an offline hackathon may become a challenge for the organisers.

To host a hackathon, you will need a place which meets these requirements at the very least:

- Enough capacity to accommodate all attendees, which include members of hack teams and the organizing team, mentors and speakers, support staff and volunteers, judges, journalists, guests, and the equipment. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, make sure that the venue allows you to respect any social distancing rules that may be in place.
- If your hackathon includes capacity building elements, such as master classes and presentations, the venue must have two types of physical spaces, for general meetings like opening, pitches and talks, and a designated space for each hack team to work on the project (a table and chairs). Add here designated areas for hardware, food, sponsors, etc.
- The wi-fi network should be able to handle 3 devices per attendee. Set up several networks and add additional cables for a high-speed wired connection.
- There must be enough amperage for computers, phones, and hardware devices (approximately 2-3 devices per participant).
- The venue needs to have audio-visual equipment for opening talks, presentations, masterclasses and the final pitches of the teams.

TIP

If you are organising hackathons bringing together people from several countries and are planning to have a multi-lingual event, consider simultaneous interpretation for common sessions, such as opening, pitches and talks, etc. And don't forget that simultaneous interpretation requires special equipment as well as enough space for placing the interpretation booths.

- There must be enough tables and chairs for all participants and teams, both in the 'common' space and at their working spots.
- Catering services must be available, with a good variety of options to meet the dietary requirements of the attendees.
- The building must be accessible for participants with special needs.
- A "relaxation" or "meditation" room or space, especially if you do not provide overnight accommodations to participants.
- Secure space for organizers and attendees to store their expensive equipment safely.

If you organise an **online hackathon**, your 'venue' becomes digital – the technical platform you will use: as a minimum you will need a general information and meeting hub for your participants and mentors (for example, we use Slack), virtual 'rooms' for large online meetings (for example ZOOM, Webex, Microsoft Teams, etc.), such as opening, pitches and capacity building webinars, and for smaller meetups of the teams and their mentors; a common platform for publishing ideas and prototypes. Do not forget some of the other small but important things: an online calendar with updated information on all events, a process / platform to book consultations with mentors, timeslots for pitches, information emails and chats.

TIPS

Start looking for the venue as soon as you know the location and preliminary dates of your offline hackathon, but no later than 3 months before the event.

Please don't forget that some of your participants may be vegetarian or vegan or may not be able to eat certain kinds of meat (such as pork). Just be mindful of these differences and, if you want to reduce waste, consider sending a short survey to participants on their dietary restrictions before the event.

EaP | Eastern Partnership

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP CIVIL SOCIETY FACILITY

GDSI
Delivering Sustainable Solutions

There are lots of options when it comes to choosing all-in-one solutions for online virtual hackathons (google 'platforms for online hackathons'), and building your own system, combining several free and/ or proprietary solutions – like we did for our 2020 Online Eastern Partnership Civil Society Hackathon. This image below gives you an idea of some tools we used at the 2020 Online Hackathon.

2020 Online Eastern Partnership Civil Society Hackathon Process

Developers and designers
APPLY NOW
ict.eapcivilsociety.eu

01
IT Professionals and **Graphics Designers** apply for the 2020 Online Hackathon

Up to **15 ideas of digital solutions** selected within the 2020 Online Ideathon: websites, mobile apps, chatbots, games,..

Until **JUNE 29**

02
30 developers and designers meet **the authors** at the opening of 2020 Online Hackathon

JULY 9

03
Authors publish their projects

JULY 9-10

04
Authors present their projects live to **the developers and designers**

JULY 11

05
Building/verifying hack teams: developers and designers choose the project they want to work on

Until **JULY 15**

06
Hack teams work on the prototypes:

Teams discussions | Individual consultations & webinars with mentors

Until **JULY 30**

07
Prep meeting for final pitches with **Hackathon Coordinator**

JULY 30

08
Live final pitches and **online voting** for best solution

AUGUST 1

1 HACK TEAM
=
author of the project
+
developer
+
graphic designer

Up to **TOP 7 SOLUTIONS** of the 2020 Online EaP Civil Society Hackathon will be nominated for funding through the EU's Digitalisation for Civil Society Award

TIP

Go for the platforms and solutions normally used by your target participants!

06. Set Up the Webpage

Whether it's a stand-alone website, or a dedicated page on your organisation's portal, your hackathon definitely needs it. The hackathon page is the key entry point to your event and the main source of information to anyone planning to participate.

Do not wait until you have all the information to launch your website! By the time you have gathered all the details, it could be too late. You are good to go online with the first iteration of your website when you know the following details:

- the hackathon dates and format (if face-to-face – the place).
- selected topic and subtopics and general idea or overview of the prizes.
- a designated email address to answer potential applicants' questions.
- links to the event's social pages.
- a date when applicants should check back for more information or can submit their applications.
- a basic FAQ about the event to explain things to someone who has never been to a hackathon before.

[2] Regulation on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, commonly known as General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR) is a regulation on data protection and privacy in the European Union (EU) and the European Economic Area (EEA). It also addresses the transfer of personal data outside the EU and EEA areas: https://gdpr.eu/

TIPS

Participants rarely care about the venue, so mentioning first the hosting city is enough.

Get a simple pre-registration form to capture the initial interest of your potential participants including: their name, email address and some social media accounts can be a great starting point.

Don't forget about data protection and privacy principles and requirements when collecting, storing and managing participants' personal data! If you have participants from the EU member states, GDPR[2] is your standard.

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP CIVIL SOCIETY FACILITY

GDSI Delivering Sustainable Solutions

Once you have these elements, start working on the **main website**. A typical hackathon website is designed as a landing page, with the online application form (or forms) linked to it.

A typical hackathon website has the following sections (in order of their importance for the users):

- **Landing part,** i.e. your hackathon name, logo, dates and most importantly the registration button for your attendees.
- **About the Hackathon section,** i.e. all the major information you want your attendees to know like the goals of the event, your motivation, a short reference of your team, etc.
- **Challenges,** especially if you have a very specific topic or subtopics.
- **Prizes and other incentives to participate** is often more important than information on the hackathon, but typically comes later.
- **Mentors & Speakers** as star profiles may become another important incentive for people to participate in the hackathon. If relevant, add the Judges section here, too.
- **Agenda of the hackathon.**
- **Rules and FAQ** are essential for any newbie attending your hackathon. This will also help you significantly reduce the load off your support emails.
- **Partners & Sponsors** If other organisations are supporting you or donors are providing you with funding for your event, always mention them!
- **Footnotes,** which often contain all the important documentation of your hackathon including the rules, code of conduct, support emails and/ or any contact form.

! TIP

Use 'Register' button generously throughout the whole website.

....

About section is best opened as a pop-up or in a separate window

....

Agenda and Mentors & Speakers sections can be hidden before you get the information confirmed, and published or updated on a rolling basis as you advance with your preparations.

....

Some donors can have very specific communication and visibility requirements. Make sure you know and respect them!

07. Launch & Promote the Call

When it comes to promotion, 'too early' and 'too much' do not apply. Your aim is to reach as many people as possible, while at the same time targeting the right audience. Remember: to get the desired number of ideas at your hackathon, you need to receive at least twice the number of applications. In addition to the rough 50% elimination rate rule, you should also consider that you are likely to have up to a 50% no-show rate for free hackathons, especially among your local 'no- travel-covered' participants.

So, start with promoting your hackathon well before opening the registration, and ask every team member, mentor, judge, speaker and stakeholder to share the information.

To reach your attendance goal, especially in countries where civil society is new to hackathons and civic tech, using only 'normal' information and communication channels, like websites, newsletters and social media, will not be enough. Do not underestimate the importance and power of word-of-mouth! And get creative!

Here are some outreach ideas that might help you:

- Organise small informal online/offline meetups with potential applicants or participate in relevant meetups or events in order to pitch your hackathon. Explain what your hackathon is about, what ideas and participants you expect, what the winners will get, how the application process works, and so on. In other words, show them the carrot and minimize their fears.
- Accept every speaking opportunity at other relevant events. Have a couple of slides on your hackathon's key aspects (see above) that could be used by any organising team members.
- Reach out to student groups and departments, either directly or through your partners and hackathon ambassadors. This is especially useful if you need many individual developers and designers to help with prototyping solutions.

OUR STORY

Be ready to run several promo campaigns for one event. The actual number of your promotion campaigns will depend on what types of participants you will need for your hackathon. For instance, as we accepted applications with ideas from civil society activists and applications from individual technical experts, we ended up running two parallel marketing campaigns for these two very different target audiences.

- Send direct letters with the request to share the information to the key local networks of your target audiences – CSO platforms, developers' communities, IT hubs, incubators, accelerators, larger civic tech programs, etc.
- Reach out to your partners and donors to ask them to promote the opportunity within their networks and to their beneficiaries. An opportunity recommended by an international donor with known funding capacities will be seen differently and not as just another 'random' event.
- Try to create awareness and a buzz around your event by mentioning this in conversations with relevant people. Messaging or calling someone you know from the civic tech community might help you with the 'word-of-mouth' aspect of your campaign. If you have organised at least one hackathon before, this can be beneficial if the hackathon was a success - a good reputation within the community goes a long way. Previous hackathon participants who enjoyed and got value out of the process can act as the best promoters.

You will need to talk about your hackathon as long as the registration is open, keeping a delicate balance between spamming and disappearing from newsfeeds, and without using identical messages that become tedious. It's quite a challenge, and we are only glad to share some ideas of communications you can use in social media and beyond:

- Nice infographics explaining the hackathon and its process, timing, eligible solutions and participants, or anything you can come up with!
- The best moments of your previous hackathons, quotes from ex-participants and spotlights on the winners.
- Questions from the applicants and your answers to them.
- Profiles of mentors, speakers and/or judges
- Profiles of sponsors and donors.
- 'Behind-the-scenes' moments of your team.
- Custom event frame for Facebook profile photos.
- Memes, jokes & anything relevant and proper that will make your readers smile…

! TIP

Convince mentors and speakers to have short video shout-outs!
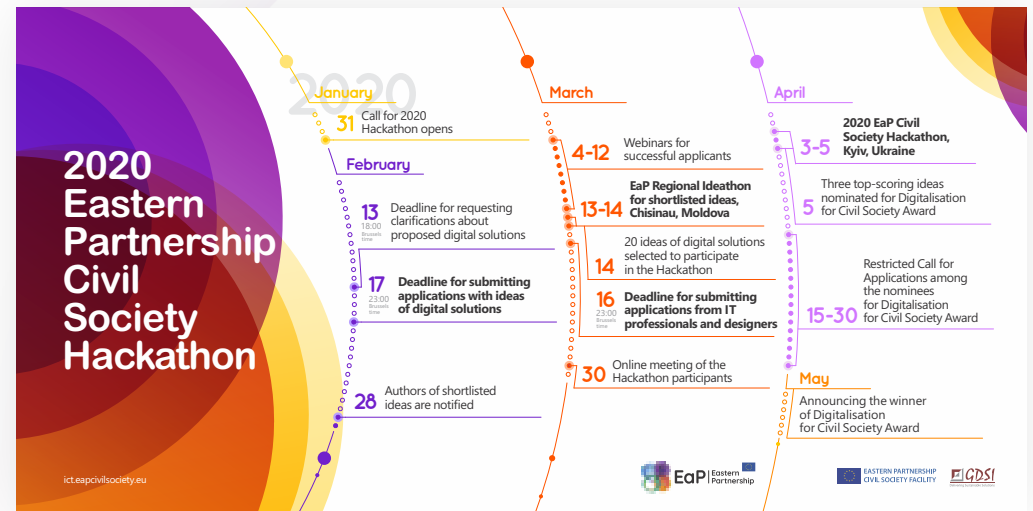
08. Gather the Mentors & Build the Agenda

Despite all your efforts, at the end of the day most participants will internally evaluate your hackathon according to their two main criteria – agenda and mentorship.

Insightful, attentive and to-the-point mentoring is key to achieving the desired results from a hackathon. Based on our experience, we recommend putting together your team of mentors some 4-5 months before the event.

For many professionals, hackathons are a great way to give back to the community – and to promote their case or product.

Again, there is no universal matrix that would help you get the right people on board, but our experience-based approach might work for you too:

- Depending on how advanced your teams are, you will need one mentor for 3-5 teams. More mentors will get bored, and fewer will be overwhelmed.
- As you will have mixed teams, i.e. civil society and tech people, look for a similar composition and proportion in your mentors' team, mixing people with soft and technical skills.
- Mentors' expertise must meet the hackathon participants' immediate needs and fill the gaps in their knowledge and skills. So, if you expect a digital solution at the end of the day, at least some mentors must have a background in relevant software development; if you expect participants to pitch a detailed promotion plan, you will need a marketing and communication expert.
- Look for mentors who are 'doers', i.e. professionals with at least one real case (product) relevant to what you expect as deliverables from your hackathon participants, either in the past or now. Participants will test their knowledge with very specific questions, from a good slogan to solving a coding issue.
- Go for committed experts as mentors and invite those with a high-profile but less time for a more intensive engagement as speakers. Some teams might require hours of advice and support, often outside of business hours, and the most valued mentors are those who have concrete experience and are available to do that.
- Keep mentors' language skills in mind. Interpretation might help, but some things might be 'lost in translation'.

OUR STORY

Mentors with a background in product targeting and design were among the top-rated and most in-demand at our EaP Civil Society Hackathons.

As you search for mentors, you will also build and fill up your hackathon agenda. A typical hackathon **agenda** includes an opening part, the first pitches, a team building timeslot, capacity building sessions (masterclasses, talks, presentations or workshops), hacking time, meals, (in)formal networking activities, final pitches and judging, and the closing ceremony.

While the final agenda will depend on your hackathon format, these tips might help you with estimating time:

- While we all want to make our events informative, make sure you leave sufficient time for teams to hack (i.e. work on their projects). Aim to include no more than 4-6 talks and masterclasses for a 48-hours hackathon. From your mentors, select only those with the most relevant cases and best public speaking skills to present their stories at the hackathon. Check with the rest if they would agree to speak on a topic at a pre-hackathon webinar. If you need more timeslots for speakers, prepare to run them in parallel with the teams hacking – and expect much fewer attendees.

- Be very conservative when calculating time for first and final pitches. A 3-minute pitch with a prototype demonstration or slides and two questions and answers will take 8-10 minutes of real hackathon time per team.

- If you have multiple evaluation phases, be sure to block out enough time for each of them with some buffer time in-between.

- Add at least one so-called 'check-in' session with participants, when they give a quick update on their progress to the Hackathon hosts and mentors and outline any challenges they are experiencing. A check-in session can be attended by team leaders only, and it is the best opportunity for you and mentors to jump in and help when needed.

- Shortly after the hackathon halfway point, hold a special session with team leaders on their final pitches. There you will go over the final pitching rules and the evaluation criteria and process, explain any template attendees need to use, and answer their questions.

09. Select Participants

Your call is closed, you received the desired number of applications – and all you want is to take a break. Sorry to disappoint you, but you can't as now it's time to decide who will actually participate in your hackathon.

- When assessing the applications, evaluate the idea, not the proposed technical format – web, mobile app, or a chatbot. The format is often changed during the hackathon, either by the mentors' or other team members' influence.
- Evaluate any idea with four criteria in mind: its feasibility (technical, legislative, etc.), relevance to the hackathon objectives and the real needs of the target audience, potential impact on the problem addressed and its sustainability (financial, institutional and, if relevant, political).
- See if the applicant (and the proposed team, if any) has knowledge, skills and capacities to implement the proposed solution and support it further.

If you also accepted applications from individual experts to work with other teams, evaluate these once you have decided on the ideas selected for the hackathon. Based on their portfolio, you will be able to estimate their technical knowledge and skills to make sure they can contribute to the development of at least one of the selected solutions.

TIP

Make sure your evaluation team is multidisciplinary and consists of at least 3-4 experts with relevant backgrounds. Understanding and matching technologies stack can be a challenge!

10. Prepare for the Hackathon

From an organiser's point of view, preparing for a hackathon does not differ from preparing for any other similar-scale event: invitations to guests and media, participants' travel and accommodation, catering and other service providers, promo materials and prizes, venue and equipment setup, and so on.

Thus, we will concentrate only on some specific hackathon-related aspects.

- Prepare your participants. Communicate the first pitching rules and share any templates you want attendees to use, at least 10 days before the event.
- Collect all materials. If your participants will use slides or prototypes when pitching, they need to send them to you at least 24 hours before the event. When possible, avoid participants using their own laptops for the demonstration as it will double the pitching time per idea.
- Set up all platforms and software you will need before and during the hackathon. As a minimum for an offline hackathon, it will include a cloud file sharing for documents, mass mailing system, instant messaging system (chat), and a platform for publishing news and updates with the participants' only access, with both web and mobile options.
- If you organise an online hackathon, then your minimal set of software will also include a video conferencing platform and a more sophisticated platform to serve as a hackathon hub.

OUR STORY

For our first smaller hackathons we used a closed Facebook group as the main communication platform – and it worked quite well as nearly 90% of our participants used Facebook on a daily basis. For our 2020 Online Hackathon we tried Slack as it combined many functions we needed and was well-known in the Eastern Partnership region.

EaP | Eastern Partnership

- Some other software goodies that we found very useful are:
  - An online voting system to evaluate the hackathon-born solutions and choose the winner. While there are MANY free and paid-for solutions, we do recommend trying *YouVote*, a free open source web app we developed specifically for our EaP Civil Society Hackathons.
  - Shared online calendar as the hackathon timetable (for example, Google calendar).
  - Online facility for booking consultations with the mentors and pitching slots (Calendly can work well but there are many options available).
  - Countdown timer for presentations, talks and pitches.
  - Access to a development server, where the teams working on digital solutions can temporarily host prototypes (suggested by our 2020 Hackathon participants).
- Prepare a detailed selection plan. By now you should know how you will select the winners – through a public vote, by a jury or a mix. If you go for a jury or a mixed approach, agree on, recruit and prepare instruction for the jury members (judges). Ideally judges should combine a strong technical aptitude with an understanding of social impact and the challenges faced by the different targeted beneficiaries.
- Develop, adopt, make available and enforce a Hackathon Code of Conduct. Make sure that the Code of Conduct extends to all attendees, including participants, volunteers, organisers, sponsors, judges, mentors, and support staff. Ask all attendees to agree to it.

EaP | Eastern Partnership

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP CIVIL SOCIETY FACILITY

GDSI
Delivering Sustainable Solutions

- Decide on your approach to taking and publishing participants' photos & videos. If participants come from restrictive countries, make sure that publishing their photos & videos will not endanger them. Give your attendees a choice: prepare a legal release allowing you to take, use and publish video and photos, and ask participants to sign it or clearly indicate that they agree to it. Have clearly-visible signs to be worn by non-agreeing attendees to indicate to photographers and operators they should avoid capturing these people, for instance, different coloured badges, badge holders, t-shirts, etc.
- Have an emergency plan ready. Spend some time coming up with emergency/nightmare scenarios, like the internet is down, too much power gets used and the fuse in the building gets tripped, registered participants did not show up and you do not have enough technical experts to work with your civil society people, or one of your participants has a medical emergency – and develop a document with contingency plans.
- Choose the Master of Ceremony to facilitate the process. You have two options: 'do-it-yourself', meaning that you or a member of your team hosts the event, or hire a professional host with experience in facilitating hackathons. Remember that hosting a hackathon requires preparation, endurance and enthusiasm to create the right atmosphere. If you decide on a professional facilitator, brief him or her beforehand on the process and your expectations.
- Recruit volunteers to help you and your team during the event. Depending on the number of attendees, 3-5 people will be sufficient.
- Send invitations to the stakeholders, guests and media representatives at least 10 days before the offline event and at least 5 days for an online event – and then reconfirm their attendance 1-2 days before. If you organise an online event, take an additional step and send a short email with a reminder and connection details some 15-30 minutes before you start.
- Buy enough extension cables, adaptors and standard-sized batteries. A good wi-fi amplifier, a reserve wi-fi router and an additional hotspot (mobile wi-fi router) can be your life savers.
- Arrange a never-empty drinks & snacks stand: water, tea, coffee, soft drinks, energy bars, cookies, etc. Your hackers may work until the break of dawn, and this is the minimum you can do for their comfort.

11. Run Your Hackathon

Just like in the case of a well-rehearsed play, it is important for everyone to know each other's role and schedule. Make sure you prepare a staff operational schedule denoting what happens behind the scenes — and who is involved and responsible for each activity. This document becomes essential for your first hackathon, especially when you engage volunteers and other support staff at a later preparation stage.

On the day before the event, hold a pre-hackathon meeting of your organising team, volunteers and support staff. If you organise **an offline event**, meet at the venue and physically walk-through the operational schedule in the event space, brief volunteers and confirm everyone's roles: checking-in guests, greeting and directing attendees, running social media, updating hackathon schedule, sending reminders, setting up food, checking the facilities, managing the support staff, managing transportation, and others. Check the supplies, materials, equipment, chairs and tables, internet connection – you will not have time to deal with it tomorrow.

If you organise **an online event**, your pre-hackathon check will be more technical. Ask every speaker to join and check the connection, microphone, camera and speakers, and make sure they know how to use the meeting platform (for instance, sharing the screen or the sound). When using simultaneous interpretation, run a special technical check session with all interpreters involved. In your team, agree on the roles: 'greeting' the attendees, providing general technical support, starting the recording, keeping an eye and answering questions in chat and Q&A, assisting the speakers, posting updates in the chat, etc.

TIP

If not done in advance, try to allocate a space, ideally a separate room with a lock, as the organisers' headquarters. It can be shared with mentors, if there is no space for a separate mentor's room.

Watch our webinar on Online Meetings & Live Streaming

The opening ceremony should be more than welcoming your participants and thanking donors and sponsors. It may be the only time within the whole event when you have 100% attendance and the focus of your audience. Use it to communicate all the necessary information your attendees might need on the day to make the best out of their hackathon experience. Go over the event schedule and highlight the main deadlines, describe prize(s) and the winners' selection, introduce the mentors and the organisers' team, outlining who can be reached on what issues and how they can be reached.

If you are limited on time, consider alternatives to the standard first pitches and the participants' introduction. A 15-minute ice-breaker exercise can be a substitute for 'Hi, my name is…' participants' self-introductions, and blitz interviews of the solutions authors by the host may be more insightful than 5-min pitches.

Matching is one of the most challenging and time-consuming tasks for the organisers of mixed audience hackathons. The success of a hackathon project will often depend on the skills of the hack team prototyping it. Monitor and even facilitate the team building process, especially when you have civil society people as solution owners and a limited number of technical experts to develop the prototypes. Come up with quick matchmaking techniques, like 'speed dating', profiling participants or publishing short descriptions of the ideas on a common closed platform (ideas' exhibition).

Another challenge would be to break the ice between mentors and the hack teams. This is when workshops and webinars delivered by mentors and check-in sessions will be very helpful.

OUR STORY

We ask our mentors to challenge the solution owners during the first pitches, and then initiate the first mentoring sessions by picking up 2-3 solutions they would like to help with.

When it comes to online hackathons, keeping everyone informed and engaged will be the main daily work of your Hackathon Coordinator. Our experience shows that using only one channel – for instance, a shared calendar with automatic reminders – is not enough. Use all the communication tools you have: for major activities, like opening session, webinars and pitches, add an event into the shared calendar as early as you can and invite all participants, then, a day before the event, post a message on the hackathon main platform (hub) and send an email with a reminder and connection details, and finally post and email another short reminder 15-30 minutes before you start.

With the final pitches approaching, check the status with each hack team to make sure they submit their prototype. Get teams to upload their deliverables on a pre-defined platform, or a specific machine, if the connection is too slow.

Before the teams start their pitches, go over the pitching rules and evaluation criteria once again and introduce the judges. If you use public voting (or a mixed approach), explain how this works. Voting can be done after the teams have finished their pitches, but we found it useful to open our YouVote online voting platform together with the pitches, and keeping it open 30-40 min after the last pitch.

OUR STORY

*We used the following time calculation for each pitch: 1 min for a team to assemble the presentation + 3 minutes for introduction and asking questions + 2.5 minutes for the presentation + 2 questions * 1 minute to answer each + 1.5 minute as buffer between teams.*

TIP

Announce a deadline to submit the deliverables that is an hour before your real deadline. Use the lunch break to check the submissions, prepare for the final pitches and selection.

TIP

Ask each mentor, judge or organiser to say a few words about 2-3 teams (s)he found impressive. This can be due to their team spirit, willingness to integrate the mentor's advice, creative presentation – and many other things. Divide the teams to make sure everyone is covered.

Be very strict with the timing! This relates both to the pitches and the questions to teams, if foreseen. Limit the number of questions per team, and the time to answer each question.

Announcing winners is a task and privilege you can easily pass to the sponsors and donors. Using visual props such as trophies, certificates or giant cheques will make your photos and videos look great for your post-hackathon marketing. However, paying a reward to less successful teams also matters.

When all is said and the prizes are given out, remember to thank the hackers, mentors, volunteers and support staff, such as photographers, interpreters and many others who worked really hard to make this hackathon happen – and give the floor to them, too. If you haven't already done it, thank your sponsors and donors for their support.

EaP | Eastern Partnership

12. After the event

Congratulations on your successful hackathon!

Just a few steps left to close your event:

- Send out a post-event survey to your hackers within 48 hours. Make it short, but engaging and useful, so you can make your next event even better (we did!). Next to standard questions, ask them to select their favourite mentor(s) or the most engaging speaker, evaluate the schedule and give recommendations for your next hackathon.
- Collect evidence which will help you assess your performance and the extent of your success and impact, such as aggregate press mentions, tweets, photos, videos and participants' testimonials. These will be invaluable for promoting your next hackathon.
- Send 'thank you' notes to your stakeholders, donors and sponsors with key numbers, event highlights, and your best photos.
- Schedule a retrospective meeting with your team. Go over the survey results, exchange your observation and note down the lessons learnt.
- Get the prizes out and follow up with the winners. Try to make sure that the winning projects are launched – as at the end of the day, their success is your reputation and the best publicity for your hackathons.

OUR STORY

Each year the top-scoring teams of the EaP Civil Society Hackathons were invited to apply to the Civil Society Digitalisation Award, a special facility providing up to EUR 10,000 to support the full-fledged development of the best hackathon-born solution(s). Based on the applications received, the selection committee chose one or more of the nominated ideas for further development and launch. Each winner received financial and expert support from our project to work on his/her project for the following 6 months. In total, in 2017-2021 we supported the development and launch of 5 digital solutions.

Closing remarks

If you're not sure that you are ready to launch a hackathon on your own, don't panic! You can always partner with a more experienced organisation, either from the technology or civic sector, from your home country or abroad.

There is no shame in asking for advice from more experienced organisations, like the Major League Hacking or Girls in IT, or from your mentors and even potential participants.

Moreover, there is always an option for outsourcing: there are several global companies that provide full-cycle hackathon services, from preparation to delivery in online, offline or a mixed format, and we are pretty sure you can find a local organisation or event company ready to organise a hackathon for you, in your home country.

[Some] Useful reading

- **Hackathon Organiser Guide**
  by the Major League Hacking
  https://guide.mlh.io/

- **10 Steps to Organise Your Hackathon**
  by the Agorize company
  https://get.agorize.com/

- **How to run a successful Hackathon**
  by Joshua Tauberer
  https://hackathon.guide/

- **The Complete Guide to Organizing a Successful Hackathon**
  by the Hackerearth
  https://www.hackerearth.com/

... and many others. Just google them!

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility – Regional Actions
was an EU-funded Project working with the six EaP countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) to promote the role of civil society actors in reforms taking place in their countries. The Project was funded by the European Union and implemented by a consortium led by GDSI Limited (Ireland) in 2017-2021.

More on the Project:

www.eapcivilsociety.eu
www.facebook.com/EaPCivilSociety
www.twitter.com/EaPCivilSociety

GDSI Office:

Block 15, Galway Technology Park
Parkmore, Galway, Ireland
consulting@gdsi.ie
www.gdsi.ie