

# **The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Civil Society Sector in the Black Sea Region**

## **Policy Paper**

**Black Sea NGO Forum Countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia,  
Greece, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine**

**Bucharest, July 2020**



## Abstract

The spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus has had a major impact all around the world. So far, all fields of activity have been affected by the health crisis. The development of a vaccine remains the only viable solution. Until then, the governmental authorities from different states, together with different social actors, must collaborate to adapt the economic processes and the social policies to the new conditions, in order to better respond to the needs of the ones affected by the pandemic.

The study invites to reflection on the possible solutions that the key stakeholders may adopt in order to limit the negative impact of SARS-CoV-2 on the civil society from the Black Sea Region. The objectives sought throughout this analysis refer to drawing attention to the exceptional situation the civil society finds itself into at this point, as well as to stimulating the implementation of the solidarity principle in the non-governmental sector.

The complex structure of the study underlines the most important dilemmas faced by the civil society organisations from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine – states covered by the Black Sea NGO Forum.

The study aims to encourage civil society actors and their partners to become more involved in dialogue for active and consistent support to civil society representatives from the region, as well as in advocacy campaigns involving CSOs.

## I. Introduction

This document is designed to provide support to public policy writing. The audience is policy analysts, academics and policy advisers or experts and other parties interested in the study of the development of the civic sector. The study is divided into four thematic chapters arranged as follows: problem history, problem definition, evaluation of the current situation and conclusions.

An additional chapter dedicated to policy recommendations will be included in the study based on the outcome of the conference on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Civil Society Sector in the Black Sea Region, to be organized by FOND in July 2020.

**The first chapter** of the study defines the objectives, as well as the research questions, needed for conducting the study.

**The second chapter** covers the definition of the problem, identifying models of actions in both EU and non-EU countries and highlighting the macro and the micro trends in the Black Sea region. The comparative analysis allows for a more efficient evaluation of the plans of action and the promotion of more coherent decisions in what regards the financial assistance dedicated to support regional cooperation initiatives.

**The third chapter** is dedicated to identifying the most relevant actors that can influence civil society development, but also to the analysis of official information, official documents and positions, decisions of public institutions, CSOs behaviour and emerging beneficiary needs.

**The last chapter** of the study underline the fields of potential contribution of all relevant actors and partners involved in the processes of elaborating or supporting civil society advocacy initiatives, as well as the role they may be able to play in ensuring better cohesion and a more efficient understanding of present realities.

The present study starts from the hypothesis according to which civil society is a relevant and important actor which can contribute with expertise, experience and know-how to the process of elaboration and implementation of public policies and which often delivers services that public institutions authorities cannot deliver. Looking at how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the non-governmental sector, it might be worth mentioning the public reactions that different CSO leaders had, such as the strict decisions implemented by certain governments, including the limitation of certain fundamental rights and freedoms, as well as the redistribution of the available financial resources of private and public donors to finance measures aimed at combating the spread of the new coronavirus or at limiting civil society development.

The objective of the study is to elaborate a concise analysis, starting from the current situation that the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from the Black Sea region<sup>1</sup> countries are currently facing, taking into account the specificities of each country, such as: the legislative framework that regulates freedom of association and the functioning of civil society, freedom of assembly (public manifestations and protests) and freedom of expression (hate speech and homophobia, press freedom, access to public information), governmental or private programs which are available for supporting the non-governmental sector, the level of openness of public authorities in managing the measures aimed at combating the spread of COVID-19 in a transparent and efficient manner, for the benefit of the entire society. To meet this objective, it is necessary to identify the problems that civil society organisations from the region are currently facing, to fully understand their de facto situation, as well as the challenges they are coping with, without diminishing the relevance of new types of risks and the role they play in the decision-making processes.

To achieve the set objectives and to identify solutions, a complex methodological approach was used. Applying a diversity of research instruments, such as document analysis, informal semi-structured interviews, internal survey applied among FOND Romania member organisations, has allowed the authors to highlight nation particularly opinions and to observe common elements of civil society representatives from the region in the process of documentation, opinions that are relevant for the actors that have a micro-regional approach to the non-governmental sector.

**The most important question** the policy study aims to address is: **what are the biggest challenges civil society organisations in the Black Sea region countries are going to face in the next period?**

In order to find answers to this question and identify potential solutions it is important to previously address the following guiding questions:

- To what degree the capacity and voice of the civil society will enable the CSOs to fulfill its role in society?
- Given the current situation, is it recommended for the non-governmental organizations to take on additional tasks? Can civil society complement the role played by the public authorities with expertise in developing and implementing public policies in a transparent manner, in compliance with all existing procedures and legal measures, and present alternative solutions?
- If their financing is significantly reduced, will the CSOs remain an important actor and a relevant partner for public authorities?
- What are the policies and measures that different governmental authorities can adopt in supporting the CSOs?

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<sup>1</sup> Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine – the non-governmental organisations from these countries are invited to participate in the annual and regional thematic reunions of the Black Sea NGO Forum.

- How did the affiliation to various national and international platforms contribute to mitigating the negative impact of COVID-19? How were the priorities of national and international donors (private and intergovernmental institutions) reorganized in the COVID-19 context?

The answers to these questions are relevant not only to highlight the importance of being involved in international cooperation processes. Cohesion and solidarity remain essential to achieving coherence, resilience and efficiency in times of crisis, while providing the space for identifying articulated responses by national and European government institutions.

This study will be an opportunity for the non-governmental sector to emphasise the most important challenges that civil society is facing and to access international platforms that are key in decision-making processes concerning the CSOs development. The study will be followed by a set of recommendations and proposals for advocacy activities at national and European levels.

## **II. Problem History**

### **A. Background of the Problem**

The spread of the new coronavirus, that appeared in China in December 2019<sup>2</sup>, results in new forms of human behaviour and reactions. A general trend, which can already be seen, is that no form of societal interaction and development cooperation can avoid transformation. Civil society and donors alike are no exception to this process of transformation, being forced to adapt, to focus on a more efficient management of limited resources and to mobilize volunteers to reach beneficiaries who need assistance.

Another trend that can be highlighted is the decrease in resources available for humanitarian assistance programs, international cooperation, monitoring of public policies, and ensuring the transparency in decision-making processes. Indeed, there are many examples of intergovernmental support that some states have decided to offer, attempts to facilitate cohesion at a European level, but in many cases, this proved to be insufficient, given that most governments acted only based on their local needs<sup>3</sup>, approving national measures<sup>4</sup> such as closing internal borders. In this context, civil society mobilization differed from one NGO to another, some NGOs being better prepared, others being constrained to cease their activity or to rethink the activities developed within their projects.

Despite the difficulties they faced, civil society organizations remain instrumental in addressing the crisis and its effects, as they can mobilize volunteers, reach beneficiaries from vulnerable categories, and communicate messages tailored to communities with special needs.

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<sup>2</sup> On 8th of July, 2020 the number of Coronavirus cases was 11.988.572, from which deaths 547.498. Recovered cases 6.940.286. Worldometers, COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic, July 8th, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

<sup>3</sup> Sophia Russack (ed.). "EU crisis response in tackling Covid-19 Views from the member states" European Policy Institute Network, April 20, 2020, p. 1, <https://epin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/EU-crisis-response-in-tackling-Covid-19.-Views-from-the-Member-States-5.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> International Center For Not For Profit Law. "COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker", March 15, 2020, [https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/?fbclid=IwAR1Y1IliCM\\_aU2faeCTxXVnAx9xntE7nQjGi-piwwlB\\_j998HbpmF1mzqM](https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/?fbclid=IwAR1Y1IliCM_aU2faeCTxXVnAx9xntE7nQjGi-piwwlB_j998HbpmF1mzqM)

## B. Current Status of the Problem

To highlight the current situation of the associative sector, it is appropriate to primarily carry out an analysis of the de facto situation existing in the countries included in this study, taking into account their EU-related status that might be relevant for the way they approached the crisis: **EU on non-EU member states**. Such an approach would enable a comparative analysis of the trends and patterns applied by the governmental authorities concerning civil society, as well as of the strategies implemented by the different CSO representatives of these states.

On a national level, many of the identified problems during the research phase highlighted the difficult situation that the NGO sector is facing: insufficient regulation of NGO sector activities and vague procedures, insufficient financial resources, lack of civil society programs, incoherent strategies for civil society development, and shortage of human resources. Moreover, in some of the studied countries, political actors were reported to have used the internal context created by COVID-19 to strengthen their power, which diminished the positive impact of the previously promoted and developed public policies. Russia is one such case where the authorities used the state of emergency to gain access to personal data of the population, or to reduce the number of interventions by civil society organizations or volunteers, considering that these actions could have later turned into permanent movements of social actions. However, this is not a unique case, as in most states there have been situations in which the human rights experts or media experts have reported attempts by government authorities<sup>5</sup> to pass laws or other public policy documents that negatively influence the enforcement of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

### The EU States<sup>6</sup>: Bulgaria, Greece, Romania

Delayed governmental responses to prevent the negative impact of COVID-19 can be seen in most EU member states in the Region. The decisions made were not immediate and the emergency systems have not become operational immediately, due to a delay in adopting the necessary operating rules and procedures. The late adoption of the necessary rules and procedures ultimately facilitated cohesion between authorities and citizens. However, many governments were taken by surprise and were not able to react quickly in order to minimize the negative impact and the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in their societies.

The study revealed that the negative impact was higher in those countries where the strategies and action plans lacked and where there was lower investment in research, analysis and assistance programs. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the increase in the number of infected people, which put a significant pressure on the national medical systems and the local and national authorities, was highly influenced by the number of seasonal migrants who returned to their countries of origin after the accelerated spread of the virus in countries like Italy, Spain, or France.

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<sup>5</sup> Civic Space Watch. "BULGARIA: Military allowed to use force amid coronavirus curbs", April 22, 2020, <https://civicspacewatch.eu/bulgaria-military-allowed-to-use-force-amid-coronavirus-curbs/>

<sup>6</sup> According to Worldometer, on 8th of July 2020, 16:30 GMT, the figures are as it follows: for the EU Member States: Bulgaria - 6.102 infected persons, 254 deceased persons, Greece - 3.589 infected persons, 193 deceased persons, România - 30.175 infected persons, 1.817 deceased persons. Worldometers, COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic, July 8th, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

In the case of Greece<sup>7</sup>, the challenge was even higher, as a large number of asylum seekers and refugees<sup>8</sup> who needed additional resources transited the country in order to avoid a potential disaster in the refugee camps. Romania has made efforts to manage the large number of citizens who have returned from Italy and avoided putting additional pressure on the medical system. The procedures imposed by the authorities for the isolation of those who returned to the country had as objective to restrain the number of affected persons. Bulgaria faced socio-economic challenges due to the fact that citizens insisted on adopting measures in support of the medical system and of some categories of employees working in certain sectors of the economy, as well as on allocating special funds aimed to support social and economic measures. At the same time, there were tensions rising between ethnic communities, especially involving the Roma minority representatives returning to Bulgaria after the virus spread in several European countries.

Beginning in March 2020, the public opinion witnessed a weakened cohesion between authorities, political actors and NGO representatives, favored by an insufficient interaction between the main stakeholders. This was also favored by the low level of mutual trust and by the low interest shown to alternative recommendations and opinions<sup>9</sup>. The lack of expertise and the low level of professional qualification of most actors responsible for deploying emergency measures (public institutions, civil society, as well as the population) was another factor that exacerbated the crisis.

In the case of civil society organisations in the EU member states, one of the biggest challenges that has been reported was maintaining **financial sustainability**, given that access to funding and programs has been restricted in the recent years. In the final quarter of 2019, several lines of financing were created that NGOs in Romania<sup>10</sup> and Bulgaria<sup>11</sup> were able to apply for - more specifically, the EEA and Norway Grants. Previously, the CSOs in these countries have experienced serious difficulties, as financial opportunities addressed to the civil society were extremely limited in the last 3 to 4 years, with donors opting for regional cooperation programs aimed at facilitating the transfer of good practices and experience to non-EU member states in the region. The spread of SARS-CoV-2 led to the partial withdrawal of funding available for certain actions and the distribution of resources to finance pandemic control programs. Most donors who made such decisions launched calls that focused on combating the spread of COVID-19 by the end of March 2020. Until then, uncertainty dominated the decision-making processes.

The arguments presented above highlight the fact that **the lack of government programs aimed at supporting the CSO sector** can have many negative consequences leading to decreased capacity of the CSOs to deliver on their mandate and fulfill their mission.

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<sup>7</sup> Aitima. "Protect the most vulnerable to ensure protection for everyone! 'Restore legality to protect refugees and the society at large amidst the pandemic' Open letter signed by 121 Organizations", Atena, March 25, 2020, <http://www.aitima.gr/images/pdf/anakoinosi2020en.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Athens Food Collective. ATHENS FOOD COLLECTIVE: COVID-19 RESPONSE, <https://donate.helprefugees.org/campaigns/athens-food-collective-covid-19-response/>

<sup>9</sup> At the European level, in countries with high confidence in public institutions, there has been a trend towards more efficient crisis management and fewer slippage of citizens in complying with the measures imposed by the authorities. Social trust increases the ability to cooperate voluntarily, without people being forced by a third party, such as the state. Researcher: Denmark's world record in confidence helps us in the fight against corona, March 2020, <https://videnskab.dk/kultur-samfund/forsker-danmarks-verdensrekord-i-tillid-hjaelper-os-i-kampen-mod-corona>

<sup>10</sup> EAGrants. Granturile SEE și Norvegiene, <https://www.eagrants.ro/apeluri>

<sup>11</sup> Active Citizen Fund. New call for proposals under the Small Initiatives Scheme starts with new Application Guidelines, March 17th, 2020, <https://www.activecitizensfund.bg/public/portfolios/newsItem.cfm?id=128>

De facto, one of the biggest challenge faced by non-governmental organizations was **access to beneficiaries in disadvantaged communities**, due to the limitation of the freedom of movement - restricting field activities involving people from vulnerable groups (children, people with disabilities, people with limited incomes, people<sup>12</sup> belonging to minority groups<sup>13</sup>). The state of emergency has often been accompanied by strict prohibitive measures<sup>14</sup> affecting people's capacity to leave their places of residence, except for major emergency situations.

Even under such difficult conditions, experts from civil society organizations, coalitions, and national or regional platforms reached out to beneficiaries and elaborated position papers<sup>15</sup> in order to contribute to a better understanding of the situation of the final beneficiaries<sup>16</sup> as well as that of the civil society as a whole. The studies were also aimed at inspiring advocacy measures to support legislative initiatives (legislation adapted to the new conditions - tax, human resources, financial support programs dedicated to civil society). The measures were aimed at securing CSOs with the same type of support (technical assistance)<sup>17</sup> from the Government that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) received.

Given these existing challenges, civil society representatives believe that the government must have access to the expertise and knowledge of the sector for joint actions to reduce the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable communities. In this context, for greater effectiveness, the governmental response needs to involve as many actors (experts, social services) as possible for a successful cross-sectoral approach, including civil society and the private sector.

As a first step, to convey the existing needs at the level of civil society to the government, the NGOs have carried out an analysis of the urgent needs that should be met by authorities. What emerged from these internal analyses is that the needs noted for Bulgaria and Romania are somewhat similar. These demands, being primarily of an economic nature<sup>18</sup>, point to the urgent

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<sup>12</sup> Svetoslav Todorov, "Bulgaria's Marginalised Roma Feel Singled Out in Pandemic", Balkan Insight, April 22, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/22/bulgarias-marginalised-roma-feel-singled-out-in-pandemic/>

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "Bulgaria / COVID-19 response: "Stop hate speech and racial discrimination against the Roma minority" – UN experts", May 13, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25881&LangID=E>

<sup>14</sup> Sofia Globe, "Covid-19: Bulgarian MPs pass Health Act amendments with anti-epidemic measures", May 12, 2020, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2020/05/12/covid-19-bulgarian-mps-pass-health-act-amendments-with-anti-epidemic-measures/>

<sup>15</sup> ChildPact Coalition for Child Protection. "Bulgaria: National Network for Children calls for urgent measures to limit the risk for children and families during Covid19 crisis", April 17, 2020, <http://www.childpact.org/2020/04/17/bulgaria-national-network-for-children-calls-for-urgent-measures-to-limit-the-risk-for-children-and-families/>

<sup>16</sup> FONPC (Federatia organizatiilor neguvernamentale pentru copil), SOS Satele Copiilor România, Terre des Hommes România și World Vision România. Impactul izolării asupra copiilor, inclusiv asupra celor „invizibili”, <https://campaniamea.declic.ro/petitions/ce-impact-va-avea-izolarea-asupra-copiilor-inclusiv-asupra-celor-invizibili>

<sup>17</sup> NGO News. "DOCUMENT DE POZIȚIE Organizațiile neguvernamentale necesită măsuri de suport pentru a se adapta și contribui activ la rezolvarea problemelor sociale generate de pandemia COVID-19", Martie 24, 2020, [https://www.stiri.org/assets/files/document\\_de\\_pozitie\\_ong-urile-au-nevoie-de-masuri-de-suport-in-contextul-covid-19\\_fdsc.pdf](https://www.stiri.org/assets/files/document_de_pozitie_ong-urile-au-nevoie-de-masuri-de-suport-in-contextul-covid-19_fdsc.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> SolidBul. "ЗАДЪЛЖИТЕЛНИ СОЦИАЛНО-ИКОНОМИЧЕСКИ МЕРКИ В УСЛОВИЯ НА ПАНДЕМИЯ", March 14, 2020, <http://solidbul.eu/?p=7944>



need for economic support for employees from different economic sectors during the pandemic, to counteract its negative effects or urgent measures to reform the national health systems.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, the lack of an initial response, coordinated at an European level, and the outlining of the tendency of separate action of EU member states at the beginning of the pandemic have created premises for promoting disinformation campaigns on certain topics, especially against the EU and NATO<sup>20</sup>, an opportunity exploited by foreign actors to promote foreign policy interests, i.e., their geopolitical agenda.

This narrative began to be spread through social media channels. The aim is to reduce public trust in European institutions. Although at the national level each EU member state took decisions independently, adapted to the context and internal challenges, the principle of solidarity was not completely abandoned, as it was supported and applied by officials from different partner countries.

At an internal level, in Romania, the first measures taken by the authorities after the onset of the state of emergency were related to the management of cases of disinformation. The Romanian Communications Regulatory Authority (ANCOM)<sup>21</sup> has blocked the activity of several websites that have disseminated false information about the spread of COVID-19. After several notifications regarding the risk of self-censorship, ANCOM allowed the resumption of activity for these publications. Public authorities may be "tempted" to abuse the power they have with the provision that allows public agencies to interpret certain provisions of the laws on the state of emergency<sup>22</sup>, but also to restrict freedom of expression.<sup>23</sup>

Such laws or measures that limited fundamental freedoms have raised the concern of the European Federation of Journalists<sup>24</sup>, which draws the attention of public authorities to the fact that journalists must be allowed unrestricted access to information in order to act for the public good. Also, in some states, however, the reaction of civil society in support of the press and freedom of expression was immediate. Protests took place on social networks, as the new restrictions did not allow outdoor protests.

As an organization that is involved at the regional level in advocacy activities on international development,<sup>25</sup> a priority for FOND Romania was to highlight the contribution of European countries, which are the subject of this research, for the official development assistance provided

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<sup>19</sup> Amnesty International. Greece: COVID-19 crisis exposes urgent need to bolster austerity-ravaged health system, April 27, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/greece-covid-crisis-exposes-urgent-need-to-bolster-austerity-ravaged-health-system/>

<sup>20</sup> Misreport: Știri despre știrile false. "Ediția #14 - Efectele dezinformării pe timpul pandemiei de COVID-19", May 19, 2020, <https://newsletter.misreport.ro/issues/edi-ia-14-efectele-dezinformarii-pe-timpul-pandemiei-de-covid-19-248155>

<sup>21</sup> Radio Free Europe România. "ANCOM: Au fost deblocate toate site-urile închise pentru fake-news", May 15, 2020, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/siteuri-blocate-fake-news-/30613952.html>

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Justice, Law Portal. DECRET nr. 195 din 16 martie 2020 privind instituirea stării de urgență pe teritoriul României, emitent PREȘEDINTELE ROMÂNIEI, publicat în MONITORUL OFICIAL nr. 212, March 16 2020, <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/223831>

<sup>23</sup> Radio Free Europe România. Avocatul Poporului cere explicații GCS privind închiderea mai multor site-uri, April 2, 2020, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/avocatul-poporului-cere-explica%C8%9Bii-gcs-privind-%C3%AEnchiderea-mai-multor-site-uri/30579284.html>

<sup>24</sup> European Journalists. COVID-19: restrictions on access to information in Romania: <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2020/03/29/covid-19-restrictions-on-access-to-information-in-romania/>

<sup>25</sup> The United Nations Organisation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the monitoring of the impact of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the regional level.



by their governments to the states in the region. Civil society actors in EU member states are involved as experts in programs implemented with the support of official development assistance, which can ensure the transfer of good practices and expertise to partner countries in the Black Sea Region.

The official development assistance is regulated differently, even though the trend at European level is to promote efficient and responsible models. The dependence of assistance on the national legal framework is obvious. In Greece, for example, the activity of non-governmental organisations is largely regulated by the Civil Code<sup>26</sup>, which means that financial assistance through programs supported from the state budget is extremely limited. Bulgaria<sup>27</sup>, a country with a large diaspora, has prioritized support for projects that promote Bulgarian culture, education and financial support for SMEs<sup>28</sup>. In April 2020, the Romanian Agency for International Development - RoAid has revisited its country priorities set in previous programs and adjusted its budget to the new needs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic: strengthening the capacity of public health institutions in partner countries<sup>29</sup>, food security, water resources management, and combating fake news<sup>30</sup> related to the pandemic<sup>31</sup>. There was also created at the national level an online donation platform for non-governmental organisations that are involved in activities that combat the effects of SARS-CoV-2 in the region.

**Non-EU Member States:** Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine.

The situation of civil society in non-EU Member States belonging to the region is not very different from that of civil society in the EU Member States. However, some peculiarities need to be highlighted.

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<sup>26</sup> Pantelidou, K., Vogiatzis, D., Legal aspects of civil society organisations and their relation with government: Greece in Civil Society in Europe: Minimum Norms and Optimum Conditions of its Regulation, 01.01.2017, pp. 400 - 417, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325767599\\_Legal\\_aspects\\_of\\_civil\\_society\\_organisations\\_and\\_their\\_relation\\_with\\_government\\_Greece/citation/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325767599_Legal_aspects_of_civil_society_organisations_and_their_relation_with_government_Greece/citation/download)

<sup>27</sup> Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Сътрудничество за развитие и хуманитарна помощ, Sofia, <https://www.mfa.bg/bg/ministerstvo/dokumenti/satrudnichestvo-za-razvitie-humanitarna-pomosht>

<sup>28</sup> Novinite. The Government has Allocated BGN Half a Million to Bulgarian Communities Abroad, February 19, 2020, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/203244/The+Government+has+Allocated+BGN+Half+a+Million+to+Bulgarian+Communities+Abroad>

<sup>29</sup> Romanian Agency for International Development (RoAid). Asistență pentru Ucraina în lupta contra pandemiei cu noul Coronavirus, May 21, 2020, <http://roaid.ro/asistenta-pentru-ucraina-in-lupta-contr-pandemiei-cu-noul-coronavirus/>

<sup>30</sup> Romanian Agency for International Development (RoAid). "Acord de colaborare DRRM – RoAid pentru proiecte de dezvoltare în Republica Moldova", May 27, 2020, <http://roaid.ro/acord-de-colaborare-drrm-roaid-pentru-proiecte-de-dezvoltare-in-republica-moldova/>

<sup>31</sup> Romania has reconfigured 55% of its 2020 assistance and humanitarian projects for initiatives to combat COVID-19. Romanian Agency for International Development (RoAid). Reuniunea informală a Consiliului Afacerilor Externe (CAE), pe tema asistenței pentru dezvoltare și asistenței umanitare, în contextul pandemiei COVID-19, April 9, 2020, <http://roaid.ro/reuniunea-informala-a-consiliului-afacerilor-externe-cae-pe-tema-asistentei-pentru-dezvoltare-si-asistentei-umanitare-in-contextul-pandemiei-covid-19/>

The analysis of the situation of non-EU Member States must begin with the statement that in some of these countries **government authorities do not control the entire national territory**, so access to certain areas is limited by the presence of unrecognized regimes or by the control of external forces<sup>32</sup>. Thus, the data to which the constitutional authorities have access are limited and often cannot be verified. Medical and humanitarian assistance is often delayed or blocked because unrecognized leaders promote self-isolation measures<sup>33</sup> in the regions, limiting the access of government or civil society experts.

Most of the decisions of government authorities (state of emergency, public health emergency or quarantine) referred to firm restrictions on public gatherings<sup>34</sup>, with direct effects on options for organizing demonstrations and protests<sup>35</sup>, but also on civil society<sup>36</sup>. Despite the restrictions imposed, demonstrations were held against the authorities' decisions to restrict economic activities. Such protests have existed in Russia, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. In Belarus, the protests aimed at recognizing the consequences of the spread of COVID-19 by the government authorities. In Turkey, too, in terms of the impact that COVID-19 has on the activities of civil society organizations, there is a trend similar to that observed in other states. Events and direct work activities with the beneficiaries are affected, cancellations of activities take place, funds are diminished and in some cases activities are interrupted for an indefinite period of time.

However, most of the protests were held in an online format and led to the creation of greater cohesion between civil society and journalists. Journalists were also affected by the restriction of freedom of movement, as well as by official censorship<sup>37</sup>.

Most of the initiatives, in which the principle of solidarity was applied, refer to private actions, which aimed at removing the restrictions imposed by the authorities to media<sup>38</sup>, extending access to public information and public utility data, freedom of expression – i.e., editorial policy of

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<sup>32</sup> International Crisis Group. The COVID-19 Challenge in Post-Soviet Breakaway Statelets, May 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/b89-covid-19-challenge-post-soviet-breakaway-statelets>

<sup>33</sup> Radio Free Europe Moldova, "Cristina Lesnic: „În circumstanțe extraordinare avem nevoie de soluții extraordinare”", March 31 2020, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/cristina-lesnic-%C3%AE-circumstan%C8%9Be-extraordinare-avem-nevoie-de-solu%C8%9Bii-extraordinare-/30520713.html>

<sup>34</sup> Trend News Agency. "Azerbaijani Cabinet of Ministers makes decision on additional measures within special quarantine regime", May 17, 2020, <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/3240710.html>

<sup>35</sup> The Government of the Republic of Armenia. WHAT TO EXPECT DURING STATE OF EMERGENCY, March 17, 2020, <https://www.gov.am/en/news/item/9730/>

<sup>36</sup> Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. "Civil liberties severely suppressed in Azerbaijan in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic", March 24, 2020, <https://eap-csf.eu/project/steering-committee-statement-on-the-covid-19-crackdowns-in-azerbaijan/?fbclid=IwAR2LAAQAF7X81nddc43L505480xvgMHWS-ZSgv7W2ubbXyJM5Y04KN-0mh4>

<sup>37</sup> Agora. Jurnaliștii, obligați de CA să „renunțe la enunțarea propriei opinii” în subiectele legate de COVID-19 și să prezinte pozițiile oficiale”, Chișinău, March 25, 2020, <https://agora.md/stiri/68785/jurnalistii-obligati-de-ca-sa-renunte-la-enuntarea-propriei-opinii-in-subiectele-legate-de-covid19-si-sa-prezinte-pozitiile-oficiale>

<sup>38</sup> Agora. "Dragoș Vicol s-a răzgândit și a anulat decizia care instituia cenzura asupra presei", Chișinău, March 26, 2020, <https://agora.md/stiri/68864/dragos-vicol-sa-razgandit-si-a-anulat-decizia-care-instituia-cenzura-asupra-presei>

independent publications<sup>39</sup> – transparency of public procurement, facilities for NGOs<sup>40</sup> and cancellation or waiver of sanctions in the form of fines for news that did not refer to information submitted<sup>41</sup> by national public institutions.

However, there are also situations in **which access to information** about the spread of COVID-19 **was limited** even by the authorities, who denied the existence of the problem<sup>42</sup>. Over time, new restrictions on freedom of movement and public assembly were introduced, which was proof that the difficult situation is being explored by the government. According to experts who documented the new restrictions<sup>43</sup>, the new provisions adopted by local and central public authorities were based on the existing legal framework regulating public meetings, accentuating the impact of restrictions. In the absence of official decisions on the state of emergency, these new legal regulations cannot be repealed after the crisis has been overcome. They may remain in force.

**There are no coalitions or joint actions of NGOs to initiate advocacy actions to help civil society.** At the very least, these do not appear as initiatives with long-term consolidation potential. They are more situational, such as the one launched by civic activists in the Republic of Moldova<sup>44</sup> or IDIS "Viitorul"<sup>45</sup>, but also contextual, such as that of the Association "Promo-LEX"<sup>46</sup>, which appeared as a reaction to government decisions or after an acknowledgment of the situation. One such initiative is that of journalists from the Eastern Partnership Member States<sup>47</sup>, supported by a Baltic state. Media experts have called on European officials for more financial support for the

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<sup>39</sup> National Audiovisual Council of the Republic of Moldova. "DECIZIA nr. 7/37 din 27 martie 2020 Cu privire la modul de reflectare a evoluției situației epidemiologice prin infecția cu COVID-19 în Republica Moldova și a măsurilor de protecție și prevenire", Chișinău, March 27, 2020, <http://www.audiovizual.md/files/D.%207-37%20din%2027.03.2020%20-%20Cu%20privire%20la%20modul%20de%20reflectare%20a%20evolu%C8%9Biei%20situa%C8%9Biei%20epidemiologice%20prin%20infec%C8%9Bia%20cu%20COVID-19.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> The Agency for Social Information. Обращение председателю Правительства РФ Михаилу Мишустину, Moscow, March 20, 2020, <https://www.asi.org.ru/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Tekst-obrashheniya.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Radio Free Europe Armenia. "Armenian Media Deplore Restrictions On Pandemic Reporting", March 19, 2020, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30497220.html>

<sup>42</sup> GPPAC. GPPAC Expresses Concern Over COVID-19 Response in Belarus, April 30, 2020, <https://gppac.net/news/gppac-expresses-concern-over-covid-19-response-belarus>

<sup>43</sup> Assembly of NGOs of Belarus. Belarus: new restrictions on freedom of assembly in the shadow of COVID-19, 17 April 2020, <http://belngo.info/2020.belarus-new-restrictions-on-freedom-of-assembly-in-the-shadow-of-ssovid-19.html>

<sup>44</sup> Facebook. Inițiativa Împreună Împotriva Covid-19, Republica Moldova, March, 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/impotrivacovid19/?\\_tn=K-R&eid=ARBCEQ4iWqgeTEEG-2I9PjQStUQeTWxuaZQISvSF8MylPLPxSPW3HVQBxIO8EGe3n03I\\_HMOTDkeYmVvS&fref=mentions](https://www.facebook.com/impotrivacovid19/?_tn=K-R&eid=ARBCEQ4iWqgeTEEG-2I9PjQStUQeTWxuaZQISvSF8MylPLPxSPW3HVQBxIO8EGe3n03I_HMOTDkeYmVvS&fref=mentions)

<sup>45</sup> This is an open call, launched by a Moldovan NGO to monitor the procurement procedures of goods and services needed to stop the spread of COVID-19 on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. IDIS "Viitorul". "Apel deschis al societății civile către autorități privind deteriorarea critică a transparenței achizițiilor publice efectuate de Centrul pentru Achiziții Publice Centralizate în Sănătate", Chișinău, April 10, 2020, <http://www.viitorul.org/ro/content/apel-deschis-al-societ%C4%83%C8%9Bii-civile-c%C4%83tre-autorit%C4%83%C8%9Bii-privind-deteriorarea-critic%C4%83>

<sup>46</sup> Promo-LEX. "Promo-LEX: Măsurile de urgență trebuie să fie clare, previzibile și lipsite de confuzii", March 27, 2020, [https://promolex.md/17359-promo-lex-masurile-de-urgenta-trebuie-sa-fie-clare-previzibile-si-lipsite-de-confuzii/?fbclid=IwAR1OwEG74RL5QF\\_7r9m2oygMAZ0MOrLAlYwBop083V1icMQYNbjUxxXTsvE&lang=ro](https://promolex.md/17359-promo-lex-masurile-de-urgenta-trebuie-sa-fie-clare-previzibile-si-lipsite-de-confuzii/?fbclid=IwAR1OwEG74RL5QF_7r9m2oygMAZ0MOrLAlYwBop083V1icMQYNbjUxxXTsvE&lang=ro)

<sup>47</sup> The Independent Press Association. "The letter to European institutions calling for urgent support of independent media in Eastern Partnership countries during COVID-19 pandemic", May 9, 2020, <http://api.md/news/view/ro-the-letter-to-european-institutions-calling-for-urgent-support-of-independent-media-in-eastern-partnership-countries-during-covid-19-pandemic-2204>

independent press. In other situations, NGOs have turned to international platforms to which they have access through annual membership status or as participants.

**Financial sustainability** became the biggest challenge for the entire NGO sector. Discussions with donors, representatives of public institutions, and external partners<sup>48</sup> about the future of financial assistance programs for the region are extremely important. These also include obligations previously assumed, where deadlines included in grant contracts can no longer be met, because NGOs no longer have access to beneficiaries or the access is limited, at narrative and financial reporting or the recognition as eligible of expenditure incurred for trips, which could not be made due to the spread of COVID-19. Also, for some organizations, there was a delay in allocating tranches<sup>49</sup> from donors.

Another challenge is co-financing, an important part for NGOs supporting programs in the region. Downsizing the budgets of local public authorities or private donors affects the ability of civil society to obtain additional support to cover co-financing for larger programs.

Civil society *is exploring new forms and methods of remaining an important player in the process of monitoring the implementation of political, social, and economic reforms*. The above-mentioned restrictions have had the effect of transforming the behaviour of civil society actors. Part of the associative sector has adopted a silent strategy, temporary withdrawal, or limited communication of activities, to protect its beneficiaries. Another part has gone online and is exploring new techniques<sup>50</sup> and digital<sup>51</sup> methods of interaction with beneficiaries. But there is also a part of civil society that has formulated objectives, spoke out about the problems and pressures to which it had been subjected<sup>52</sup>, assisted government authorities, and has been actively involved in public debates.

A common problem in both categories of states *was public stigmatization and increase in hate speech*. This issue has taken two directions: hate speech promoted against minority communities (sexual<sup>53</sup>, lacking access to services or ethnic, in particular) and against those who have been infected with SARS-CoV-2. If in the first situation, that of hate speech promoted against ethnic

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<sup>48</sup> Engage, Голос громадянського суспільства України – Альона Гетьманчук, April 13, 2020, [https://engage.org.ua/ukr/holos-hromadianskoho-suspilstva-ukrainy-alona-hetmanchuk-2/?utm\\_source=eSputnik-promo&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Special\\_Issue\\_&utm\\_content=346466968&fbclid=IwAR12JZTvnMcSQ7a1s0mUz8Oe4lON8WN8ES0ImB0z-D-UKbYBoxRLrhZN0NM](https://engage.org.ua/ukr/holos-hromadianskoho-suspilstva-ukrainy-alona-hetmanchuk-2/?utm_source=eSputnik-promo&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Special_Issue_&utm_content=346466968&fbclid=IwAR12JZTvnMcSQ7a1s0mUz8Oe4lON8WN8ES0ImB0z-D-UKbYBoxRLrhZN0NM)

<sup>49</sup> Third Sector Foundation of Turkey. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 OUTBREAK ON CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING IN TURKEY, Survey Report, April 2020, <https://tusev.org.tr/urfiles/images/TheImpactofCovid19OnCSOsOperatinginTurkey.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> Pact. Belarusian Civil Society in the Situation of COVID-19 Pandemic, April 3, 2020, <https://www.pactworld.org/news/belarusian-civil-society-situation-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>51</sup> Institute of Mass Information. UKRAINIAN JOURNALISTS IN LOCKDOWN: ANALYTICAL REPORT BASED ON SURVEY RESULTS, April 13, 2020, [https://imi.org.ua/en/monitorings/ukrainian-journalists-in-lockdown-analytical-report-based-on-survey-results-i32627?fbclid=IwAR0wHWwUuJH-fIGQy8DRRSIVbzFqLho4uC3gcj7\\_KV8wgEOiAhhN4\\_780w](https://imi.org.ua/en/monitorings/ukrainian-journalists-in-lockdown-analytical-report-based-on-survey-results-i32627?fbclid=IwAR0wHWwUuJH-fIGQy8DRRSIVbzFqLho4uC3gcj7_KV8wgEOiAhhN4_780w)

<sup>52</sup> Ilko Cucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation. "Спалах епідемії показав людям та громадським організаціям їхню силу та скриті можливості", May 16, 2020, [https://dif.org.ua/article/spalakh-epidemii-pokazav-lyudyam-ta-gromadskim-organizatsiyam-ikhnyu-silu-ta-skriti-mozhlyvosti5?fbclid=IwAR0wHWwUuJH-fIGQy8DRRSIVbzFqLho4uC3gcj7\\_KV8wgEOiAhhN4\\_780w](https://dif.org.ua/article/spalakh-epidemii-pokazav-lyudyam-ta-gromadskim-organizatsiyam-ikhnyu-silu-ta-skriti-mozhlyvosti5?fbclid=IwAR0wHWwUuJH-fIGQy8DRRSIVbzFqLho4uC3gcj7_KV8wgEOiAhhN4_780w)

<sup>53</sup> Georgia Today. Transgender Woman Sets Herself On Fire in Tbilisi, Protesting Gov't Negligence, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/20949/Transgender-Woman-Sets-Herself-On-Fire-in-Tbilisi%2C-Protesting-Govt-Negligence>

minorities, as it happened in Bulgaria or Georgia<sup>54</sup>, civil society<sup>55</sup>, supported by partner statements<sup>56</sup> or financial assistance<sup>57</sup>, has made clear steps for the authorities to take the necessary measures to minimize the impact, in the second situation, that of stigmatizing those infected, the challenges are greater. In this case, the authorities have the mission to correctly inform the population about the effects of COVID-19, without causing additional tensions between the inhabitants of the same community.

In the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Armenia, there are several common disinformation trends, maintained by the Kremlin. It portrays a common enemy in the person of Bill Gates and of the 5G technology. Since gaining its independence, Georgia has been targeted by Russian-funded disinformation campaigns. They try to expose governmental weaknesses, to discredit the authorities, to decrease the population's trust in public institutions, to cultivate an acute sense of nationalism and xenophobia, and to undermine the EU and its aid, which is not enough. In the Republic of Moldova, the Metropolitan Church of Moldova<sup>58</sup> is the one that has launched official campaigns in which it addresses the authorities to stop the “forced vaccination of the population”, chipping and expansion of 5G.

The challenges faced by civil society in all the Black Sea region are similar. They refer to financial sustainability, leadership, ability to adapt to new conditions. The initiatives that appeared during this period (March-May 2020) did not refer only to discussions between donors and NGOs. Civil society has maintained a complex dialogue with all partners and beneficiaries, providing them with expertise, experience, and voluntary involvement for the support of vulnerable communities.

### C. Key Risk

Without a sustainable and independent civil society from domestic political actors, the promotion of democratic values, transparent governance, respect for the rule of law and human rights can be undermined. The support of civil society in this time of crisis is essential for it to survive to fulfil its main role, as a pillar of democracy.

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<sup>54</sup> Civil.ge. CSOs Concerned over Xenophobic Remarks against Ethnic Azerbaijanis in Quarantined Marneuli, Bolnisi, March 23, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/344147>

<sup>55</sup> Georgia Today. Human Rights Experts' Statement on the Int'l Day Against Homophobia, May 17, 2020, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/21184/Human-Rights-Experts>

<sup>56</sup> Interpressnews. EU delegation to Georgia issues statement on gender equality and protection of vulnerable groups in Georgia, April 27, 2020, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/107102-eu-delegation-to-georgia-issues-statement-on-gender-equality-and-protection-of-vulnerable-groups-in-georgia>

<sup>57</sup> EWMI-Prolog. USAID/PROLoG Supports Georgian Democracy Initiative to Fight against Stigma Caused by COVID-19 Pandemic, April 24, 2020, <http://ewmi-prolog.org/en/news/1286-usaid-prolog-supports-georgian-democracy>

<sup>58</sup> The Orthodox Church of Moldova, the Metropolitan Chişinău and Entire Moldova Church. “În cadrul lucrărilor Sinodului BOM au fost semnate două adresări importante către autoritățile statului”, Chişinău, May 19, 2020, <https://mitropolia.md/in-cadrul-lucrurilor-sinodului-bom-au-fost-semnate-doua-adresari-importante-catre-autoritatile-statului/>



### III. Problem definition

#### A. Statement of the Problem

The elaboration of this study has a firm motivation, namely to identify at a regional level the problems faced by civil society; to highlight the role of central actors, that can contribute to a qualitative change in the NGO sector; and to propose methods of action, recommendations, and solutions to improve the current situation. Opportunities to analyze, reflect on solutions and promote public policies are quite a few at the regional level, in consequence the voice of NGOs is rarely consulted and only when national and international partners are looking for additional solutions or guarantees for external support.

#### B. Methodology

This study is primarily addressed to the public authorities and donors organisations. The analysis aims to draw attention to potential challenges and needs, current problems, as well as past gaps that need to be corrected.

Several tools and methods of analysis were used to achieve this goal. As a first instrument, the authors applied the official documents analysis. These normative acts were adopted by government authorities during the spread of the virus: decrees, laws, military ordinances (Romania), decisions on quarantine, emergency or state of emergency in the field of public health.

Basic human rights have been affected in most countries. In order to capture such limitations, the authors have monitored government activities through press review and reports of various institutions and mass media. Actions that limited the freedom of assembly, association, and expression included: protests (cancellation of public events, ban on gatherings of more than two or three people, no protest permits are issued); independence of editorial policies has been affected, the press was ordered to use only information from official government sources, which had the effect of imposing censorship; public institutions could not provide services to beneficiaries or to NGOs. Some CSOs even resorted to technical unemployment, restructuring human resources, or ceasing activities, following the restriction of funds. Also, the new operating conditions of public institutions have led to the extension of the official period<sup>59</sup> (from 30 days to 60 days) to respond to requests from citizens or the press, which has the consequence of limiting access to useful public information for citizens.

To deepen this assessment of the impact of SARS-CoV-2 on civil society, the authors have reviewed as well analyses prepared by experts from the region, calls for national coalitions to adopt normative acts<sup>60</sup>, as well as regional initiatives by NGOs position papers<sup>61</sup> which highlighted the

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<sup>59</sup> OSCE. Coronavirus response bill should not curb freedom of information in Romania, stresses OSCE Media Freedom Representative, March 30, 2020, <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/449380?fbclid=IwAR3MV9Hu-h3VYvKZIBUOo5iNdKxjncmBnm4CN--NIQTz2t7Mh9GznmFM2QUQ>

<sup>60</sup> Legal Resources Center from Moldova. Organizațiile societății civile cer Parlamentului transparență decizională reală în procesul de definitivare a noii legi ONC, Chișinău, April 30, 2020, <https://crjm.org/organizatiile-societatii-civile-cer-parlamentului-transparenata-decizionala-reala-in-procesul-de-definitivare-a-noii-legi-onc/>

<sup>61</sup> Civil Society Development Foundation. "DOCUMENT DE POZIȚIE Organizațiile neguvernamentale necesită măsuri de suport pentru a se adapta și contribui activ la rezolvarea problemelor sociale generate de pandemia COVID-19", București, March 24, 2020, [https://www.stiri.org/assets/files/document\\_de\\_pozitie\\_ong-urile-au-nevoie-de-masuri-de-suport-in-contextul-covid-19\\_fdsc.pdf](https://www.stiri.org/assets/files/document_de_pozitie_ong-urile-au-nevoie-de-masuri-de-suport-in-contextul-covid-19_fdsc.pdf)

problems of civil society, contributing punctually with recommendations at the level of public policies.

Also, several surveys that aimed to highlight the internal problems faced by associations and to identify tools and methods of positively influencing the dialogue with the authorities were consulted. The reviewed approaches have contributed to a growing awareness of the importance of public debates for identifying the concrete needs of final beneficiaries and to encouraging the reorganization of the priorities for civil society partnerships.

Data generated by various civil society surveys was analyzed<sup>62</sup>. Such surveys were organized by associations to review their strategies and action plans, but also to identify the specific needs of members.

To highlight national trends, several online interviews with representatives of civil society in the region were conducted (under the Chatham House rule). Thus, extra documentation of the situation was possible, which contributed to highlighting local needs, but which can be found also in other countries in the region.

The use of these tools has made it possible to identify needs, better understand the COVID-19 context, and generate recommendations so that their content can benefit actors involved in national or regional cooperation processes.

### C. Identification of Involved Actors

Identifying relevant actors is an essential step in the analysis. It allows to highlight the actors that can contribute or affect through the decisions they make for the harmonious development of civil society. Who are these actors and what was their contribution during the fight against the spread of the pandemic?

**Civil society actors** developed position papers, appeals, public statements, advocacy campaigns, petitions; they coordinated humanitarian assistance actions for people from vulnerable communities; were engaged in fundraising, national fundraising campaigns for hospitals<sup>63</sup>, organizing marathons, social media campaigns, encouraging volunteering<sup>64</sup>, and assisting people at risk. Also they continue to monitor decision-making processes and infringements on human rights and provide at the same time assistance to central and local public authorities in the fight against the pandemic, facilitating beneficiaries' access to certain types of services or social assistance.

**Governments, institutions, and public agencies** - the actors who make decisions, develop, implement, and oversee public policies. They are also responsible for ensuring the transparency of the decision-making process and facilitating dialogue with civil society through formal consultations. During the pandemic, the behaviour of public institutions transformed. Many public institutions have limited their activity; others have started a process of forced digitalization. The

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<sup>62</sup> Questionnaire, the NDGO Platform FOND România, April 2020.

<sup>63</sup> The Community from Valea Jiului. Licitează pentru comunitate, <https://www.valeajiuluiimplicata.org/licitatii/?fbclid=IwAR3J29X-StSzkPJiCTBdRr6f8cTM6jngTFureMk37pvHQ1s1aJpwXA05r2M>

<sup>64</sup> În Grecia, guvernul a lansat un apel național de voluntariat către populație pentru a contribui la susținerea eforturilor autorităților și pentru a gestiona cât mai eficient situația generată de pandemie. Become a volunteer to treat Covid-19 disease, <https://ethelontes.gov.gr/>.



public debates have been transferred online. However, under the pretext of public health emergencies, several state agencies or public institutions avoided holding public debates on important topics, including because they wanted to avoid infecting staff.

**Political actors** have had more impactful statements at a national level, also because national elections (presidential and parliamentary elections) are to take place in 2020. The spread of the virus has been a topic taken up by various political parties. However, the "development of the associative sector" was not missing from the agenda of political actors. It is a subject that has been used to distract citizens' attention from some problems or decisions. An example of this is the Republic of Moldova, where the new NGOs Law<sup>65</sup> has been intensely debated by people with political interests.

**Intergovernmental organizations**, such as the EU, UN, OSCE, Council of Europe, BSEC, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, took a stand when national authorities of some Member States promoted extreme, harsh decisions or neglected interests of several categories of vulnerable people. Although their reaction can still be seen as delayed or limited, they provided technical and discursive assistance to NGOs and encouraged measures to ensure equitable access to resources.

**National/regional/international coalitions of NGOs** - in terms of the reaction of the NGO sector, at the national level, there was a rapid mobilization, showing solidarity. The response was focused on addressing the immediate challenges and addressing them to decision-makers. The Romania Solidarity Coalition<sup>66</sup>, for example, sent an open letter to the political decision-makers requesting action on two topics of urgent interest, such as poverty and the content of the National Strategy for Sustainable Development. At an international level, there was a rapid mobilization by the European Confederation of NGOs active in the field of development and humanitarian assistance - CONCORD on the situation caused by the pandemic, which affects civil society and all its beneficiaries. CONCORD Europe issued recommendations and letters<sup>67</sup>, positions<sup>68</sup>, policy briefs<sup>69</sup> focusing on sustainable development, addressing inequalities, and protecting vulnerable groups.

**Donors** have taken decisions to quickly redirect funds for the region (Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation<sup>70</sup>, Central European Initiative<sup>71</sup>, OSF, etc.) to programs to support actions to combat

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<sup>65</sup> Legal Resources Center from Moldova. "Demontăm mituri despre noul proiect de lege cu privire la organizațiile necomerciale", May 29, 2020, <https://crjm.org/demontam-mituri-despre-noul-proiect-de-lege-cu-privire-la-organizatiile-necomerciale/>

<sup>66</sup> România Solidară. "Scrisoare deschisă PENTRU O ROMÂNIE SOLIDARĂ", Bucharest, May 12, 2020, [https://www.romania-solidara.ro/?fbclid=IwAR2RsKs\\_STzjtZ8w9DIRCG9AvuEsonTPFwvligreLpO6m0zD00f1hnqyubY](https://www.romania-solidara.ro/?fbclid=IwAR2RsKs_STzjtZ8w9DIRCG9AvuEsonTPFwvligreLpO6m0zD00f1hnqyubY)

<sup>67</sup> CONCORD Europe. Letter to Commissioner for International Partnerships, the EU High Representative and national governments, Brussels, April 2020, <https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CONCORD-letter-DevT-FAC-08.04.20.pdf>

<sup>68</sup> CONCORD Europe. Director's blog: Is COVID-19 the wake-up call we need to invest in our social systems again? Brussels, March 2020, <https://concordeurope.org/blog/2020/03/24/covid-19-wake-up-call-invest-in-social-systems/>

<sup>69</sup> CONCORD Europe. Policy brief on the impact of Covid-19 on inequalities, Bruxelles, May, 2020, <https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EU-global-response-to-COVID-19-Forging-a-path-towards-an-equitable-future-1.pdf>

<sup>70</sup> Facebook Account. COVID-19 Fast Response Fund Call for Project Proposals, March 26, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/black-sea-trust-for-regional-cooperation/covid-19-fast-response-fund-call-for-project-proposals/3292114607469781/>

<sup>71</sup> Central European Initiative. Covid19 Extraordinary Call for Proposals Launched 600000 Eur for Projects in Field of Healthcare, <https://www.cei.int/news/8809/covid-19-extraordinary-call-for-proposals-launched-600000-eur-for-projects-in-field-of-healthcare>

the pandemic and its effects at local/regional level. Their action was aimed at an impact with multiple effects: supporting public institutions (hospitals, schools, placement centres, etc.) and supporting non-governmental organizations working directly with beneficiaries from vulnerable communities, but also for education programs for teachers (online school etc.)

### **III. Evaluation**

For non-governmental organizations in the Black Sea region, the pandemic provided time and space for reflections on resilience, changes in behaviour, and also in the needs of beneficiaries. Below are some elements of the current activity that have been affected or amplified by COVID-19:

#### ***Leadership and culture of non-governmental organizations***

In most states considered in this policy brief, there was an organizational leadership crisis before the pandemic. The limited financial resources, doubled by a problem of shrinking human capital from the NGO field, led to the perpetuation of a leadership crisis. At present, the leaders of non-governmental organizations feel this problem even more acutely because: they can no longer motivate staff to the same extent and can no longer support investments in increasing the professional level of employees. Moreover, some of them also feel the crisis individually, which can affect the organization's activity in the medium or long term.

#### ***Management and organizational sustainability***

There is still a lot of confusion among civil society representatives regarding the definition of “sustainability”, which makes the process of developing and adopting strategies and action plans very difficult. The spread of the virus has further affected NGOs in terms of their ability to manage financial resources and, consequently, human resources. In the context of restriction of funds and other options for ensuring financial sustainability, several NGOs have been conditioned to resort to the dismissal of its staff and to give up collaboration with independent experts involved in social activities through projects, without first thinking about options for multiplying services which it could offer to partners to diversify their sources of funding.

#### ***Internal and external communication***

Some civil society organizations do not have the internal capacity to pursue online communication strategies both with their beneficiaries and with public authorities or donors, which affects their ability to ensure their sustainability. They lack the tools and skills and in consequence advocacy activities are poorly developed, especially among NGOs that operate at local or regional level.

Another important element regarding communications is the assumption of a coherent position or opinion in the public space with regard to the activity of public institutions. Public authorities at times impose communication restrictions or even censorship when its external image is affected. Moreover, some decisions of several NGOs to not communicate their contributions to the fight against the pandemic have taken into consideration the interests of the final beneficiaries.

#### ***The relationship with donors***

Dialogue with donors has undergone important changes. Many donors have reoriented some of their resources to support public institutions (schools, hospitals, prisons, etc.). Another part of the available resources was directed to projects and initiatives that contribute to reducing the impact

of the spread of COVID-19, ie they were accepted for their management by public institutions<sup>72</sup> (ministries, agencies, local public authorities). In this context, a part of the civil society, very often the one that was involved in the process of monitoring the decision-making processes, was deprived of funds. Donors also decided that “investing” in media projects is relevant, contributing to the correct information of the population about the impact of COVID-19, and about the actions approved by government authorities. Last, but not least, donors acted to reduce misinformation and the phenomenon of “fake news”.<sup>73</sup>

**Transparency of decision-making and public procurement procedures** - access to public debates is limited and access to public information on public procurement is restricted, including for the fight against COVID-19 (Romania, stipulations found in presidential decrees). Several experts pointed to the high risk of abuse and uncertainty about the mode of action of contracting authorities when it comes to the threshold for direct procurement.<sup>74</sup>

The impact of such activities is reduced due to the lack of dialogue and formal meetings with central and local public authorities. The position of central and local public authorities can also be understood both as lack of experience in managing such situations and, at times, as knowingly avoiding dialogue with civil society or media actors. Many public institutions do not have legal basis to allow public meetings according to national regulations adopted to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2.

**The redistribution of public funds** for development cooperation – i.e., external actions, which were originally intended to support civil society – has considerably reduced the sustainability of previously developed programs with the help of external partners.

The importance of **volunteering** increased demonstrating solidarity within communities. Civil society organizations have launched national or local campaigns, involving volunteers, to reach as many beneficiaries as possible, especially from vulnerable communities (rural areas, the elderly, and people with disabilities).

**Hate speech and homophobia** reappeared in public discussions in some countries, and in others verbal and physical aggression against minority communities took place. The fears and frustrations of the population in different countries had a negative effect on the resumption or continuation in some places of the hate speech against some minorities (especially representatives of some ethnic minorities<sup>75</sup>). The phenomenon was common between March and May 2020 in both EU Member States and other Black Sea region countries.

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<sup>72</sup> Soros Foundation Moldova, “Inițiativa Civică ”Împreună pentru voi” și Fundația Soros-Moldova transmit echipamente de protecție poliției și penitenciarelor”, Chișinău, April 15, 2020, <https://soros.md/event/2020-04-15>

<sup>73</sup> Disinformation and the phenomenon of “fake news” were constant phenomena during the spread of the pandemic. State actors, with interests in the countries included in the Black Sea region, explored people’s fears, lack of coherence and weak resilience of public institutions, to launch campaigns with sophisticated messages, adapted to different categories of people.

<sup>74</sup> Radio Free Europe România. “Haosul achizițiilor publice în starea de urgență. Expert: decretele președintelui, „semnal periculos”, May 11, 2020, [https://romania.europalibera.org/a/haos-achizitii-publice-stare-de-urgenta-expert-decretele-presedintelui-semnal-periculos-/30606107.html?fbclid=IwAR2FMYIZ7V4kpkm5j1T\\_sDCi5uqg65MI3p-WVrz6KbrZhrRcHEOvm5jH8Xk](https://romania.europalibera.org/a/haos-achizitii-publice-stare-de-urgenta-expert-decretele-presedintelui-semnal-periculos-/30606107.html?fbclid=IwAR2FMYIZ7V4kpkm5j1T_sDCi5uqg65MI3p-WVrz6KbrZhrRcHEOvm5jH8Xk)

<sup>75</sup> Euractiv. Bulgarian authorities struggle to enforce containment with Roma population, March 20, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/languages-culture/news/bulgarian-authorities-struggle-to-enforce-containment-with-roma-population/>

***The spread of hate speech at local and national levels*** has attracted the attention of several international organizations<sup>76</sup>, which have decided to take critical positions on the decisions of some government authorities. Most experts recommend including measures to facilitate access to basic services for representatives of minority communities and excluding forms of verbal or physical violence against them.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

The COVID-19 crisis began at an international level with a low degree of solidarity, which did not go unnoticed. In these times we must not forget the essential role that collaboration plays. Through affiliation to international platforms, the interests of members are better represented. International cooperation is vital in this case because it encourages the transfer of good practices, knowledge, and experience. At the same time, it generates opportunities to strengthen joint efforts for preventing new challenges and helps at reducing the risks associated with new crises.

This research is a comparative analysis of the challenges faced by civil society in the Black Sea region. It highlights several issues that need to be addressed by actors relevant to supporting the development of the NGO sector. Among these reflections, we could highlight the relevance of adjusting the legal framework to the new realities. National government authorities are encouraged to act to adopt legal rules necessary to reduce the impact of SARS-CoV-2, which are well-justified and do not contravene international standards.

Another topic of reflection for experts in public institutions is the assessment of the economic impact of the spread of COVID-19 on civil society and the rethinking of some fiscal measures imposed on them. At the national level, there are several initiatives of NGO representatives, which offer a pragmatic perspective on the economic impact of civil society activity: funds, know-how, technical assistance for central and local authorities, and payment of tax obligations. The action of public institutions in this period refers to the adoption of similar measures, applicable to civil society and SMEs. These measures require additional facilities for the payment of taxes/utilities for the associative sector. At the same time, they could allow NGO managers to access mechanisms such as state support for technical unemployment or extension of the deadline for submitting annual declarations.

Concerning the digitalization, given the COVID-19 experience, a twofold perspective can be had in mind. First, states can pursue the digitalization of public services aimed at the civil society sector (issuing extracts from the Register of Associations and Foundations online, submitting declarations and applications, etc.). The provision of online services could facilitate the access of NGOs to quality services while avoiding travel, and therefore the potential spread of the virus. Second, the digitalization of civil society, which involves equipping organizations with the necessary tools to reach the final beneficiaries much faster (access to video platforms, technology, know-how and expertise to promote the activities and products developed by experts in this field).

Another conclusion of the study points to the increased need to diversify the services provided by non-profit organizations. Diversification of services can be implemented by civil society organizations, in the context in which national legislation allows this. By enabling the development of service provision by NGOs, the level of financial and organizational sustainability can increase.

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<sup>76</sup> United Nations and Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. "COVID-19: The suffering and resilience of LGBT persons must be visible and inform the actions of States, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25884&LangID=E>

During the pandemic period, interaction with donors became more intense. There is a need for bigger flexibility in terms of implementation deadlines, adjustment of the indicators included in approved projects and encouraging programs that contribute to strengthening the managerial sustainability of the associative sector.

The study demonstrates the need for creating an Early Warning reaction mechanism. Such a mechanism could include technical and financial measures to support civil society, with flexible procedures, easy to adapt to crises, without the need for co-financing. The prevention mechanism must also be equipped with advocacy tools for NGOs in the region, allowing them to access public debate platforms of the European institutions, and helping to limit the distribution of aggressive, incoherent messages to the associative environment in times of crisis by various actors.

Depending on the urgency of the measures to be adopted and implemented, the institutional actors concerned should contribute to the development of measures and actions to support civil society in the coming period.

In the short term, measures are needed to facilitate the work of civil society organizations, with the potential to eliminate situations that may influence the financial and organizational sustainability of NGOs. Immediate measures may also include actions to facilitate access to tax-related assistance, digitalization of public services for NGOs, adjusting national legislation and approval of rules that encourage dialogue for cooperation and development assistance, as part of strategies to reduce the impact of the pandemic.

In the midterm, a strategy to support civil society could take into account access to platforms of discussion for donors active in the region. Such a platform has already been "institutionalized" at annual meetings of the Black Sea NGO Forum. The objective pursued in this case is the analysis and organization of new priorities and thematic areas, which need support in the next period.

In the long term, the priority is to re-think fiscal incentives for supporting civil society organizations, develop permanent funds (endowments), and, where possible, organize technical and financial assistance programs for the associative environment from national budgets, following efficient and transparent procedures for the distribution of available resources from state budgets. For international organizations, such as the European Union, the creation of an Early Warning mechanism at European level could prove useful in reducing the impact of various crises.

This study allowed us to record the most important decisions of governmental authorities and to highlight the reaction of the civil society actors from most of the states participating in Black Sea NGO Forum. In the next period, we will focus on the process of developing recommendations and promoting advocacy activities at national and European levels.

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