

## Some Lessons about Civil Society's Role during the Pandemic<sup>1</sup>

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### Executive summary

This article analyses some of the challenges civil society faced in some countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during the first wave. It reviews several aspects of CSOs' activities: how in some cases they mobilised the public opinion and opposed the attempts to limit or censor information, or how they dealt with disinformation and contributed to awareness-building among the population. It compares some policies and actions taken, and attempts to identify best practices and develop policy recommendations accordingly.

**Keywords:** Civil society, awareness-building, public policy, COVID-19, disinformation

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part of the Call for Articles Series "*Building Knowledge for CSO Cooperation in the Black Sea Region*", in the context of the project "*Building CSO Capacity for Regional Cooperation within the Black Sea Region*", implemented by FOND, and funded by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation (BST), a project of the German Marshall Fund. The opinions expressed in this publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views those of the Black Sea Trust or its partners.

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The article is partly based on some findings of the project Protecting Democratic Values by Tackling Pandemic-Related Disinformation, implemented by the Centre for Policy Studies (Armenia), the Experts for Security and Global Affairs Association (Romania) and the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, with support from the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, a project of the German Marshall Fund. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the Black Sea Trust or its partners. Project participants conducted extensive desk research, analysing state policies, CSOs activities, media and online sources.

## CSOs role in dealing with the pandemic

Perhaps one of the lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic is how important the role of civil society has been, even despite some rather serious challenges they might have been facing, including the lack of autonomous decision-making capacity – which, as a part of centralisation in general, may limit the scope of actions CSOs (civil society organisations) and other non-governmental actors could perform. For example, in Slovakia heads of some educational institutions had the power to close those institutions and, by doing so, to reduce the number of people regularly commuting between the capital and the rest of the country, and concurrently civil society raised awareness and pushed politicians to act – a move which was probably one of the important components of Slovakia’s success during the first wave of the pandemic, so that country, along with Latvia, had the smallest number of deaths per million people among European countries.<sup>3</sup> It may be admitted that in some countries of the Black Sea region, namely in EaP (Eastern Partnership) countries, decisions to close educational institutions could only be made at cabinet level, and therefore precious time might be lost; the same stands for some other policy decisions as well. However, while there could be other similar examples, civil society’s role may not be overestimated.

In most EaP countries, civil society did not face problems on a level comparable to Belarus, where for several months self-organisation, including the use of protective measures and social distancing, was the way to go as the dangerousness of the novel coronavirus was not officially acknowledged, doctors were forced to register active cases as “acute respiratory virus infection,” President Aleksandr Lukashenka suggested treatment with vodka and potatoes, testing possibilities were scarce, and the football championship went on, to the amusement of British and other betting companies’ clients.

It has, however, been noted that even in countries which by any standard are far from being autocracies, there were attempts to control access to information: “*Censorship was the element that the authorities in different states did not hesitate to use ... Without civil society’s reaction, things would have been much worse from the perspective of respecting the right to information. Fundamental freedoms and rights have been violated in most states of the region.*”<sup>4</sup>

In Armenia and Moldova, which ultimately had the worst infection and death rates in EaP during the first wave, some of the challenges faced by civil society were quite similar. Both countries’ leaders initially publicly stated that the virus was not that dangerous. That approach changed within a few days, partly due to criticism voiced by CSOs, and shortly after, as epidemiological situation started worsening and state of emergency was imposed, the

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<sup>3</sup> Juraj Mesík, “The COVID-19 Miracle: What Happened in Slovakia?” *Slovak Spectator*, accessed January 12, 2021, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22428411/the-covid-19-miracle-what-happened-in-slovakia.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Angela Grămadă, “5G, Bill Gates’ ‘Desire to Have People Microchipped’ and Other Conspiracy Theories: How Armenia and Other Countries of the Region May Deal with Them?” interview by Mariam Grigoryan, *1in.am News and Analysis*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.1in.am/2817753.html>.

authorities already started to overreact. In Moldova, armoured vehicles appeared in the streets, and an attempt to impose censorship happened: the stated objective was limiting dissemination of false information about COVID-19, but in practice, censorship aimed to control the information which would reach the citizens, with a possibility to control the media. However, media experts and civil society representatives showed solidarity and acted decisively to support independent media. Online actions and campaigns extended access to public information and data of public utility, and supported freedom of expression.<sup>5</sup>

In Armenia, pro-government activists ran public rallies in support of proposed constitutional referendum till mid-March, despite strong criticism by civil society. The rallies were cancelled just a day before declaring a state of emergency, and on the night it was declared, armoured vehicles in police livery appeared on the streets as well. One of the next policy decisions also came in the form of much criticised media regulations. While those were supposed to suppress apparent efforts to spread panic about imminent hunger, mass revolt, “George Soros-led conspiracy” and other harmful narratives, the government overreacted, requiring to share coronavirus-related information only from official sources (domestic or international), so numerous media outlets and social network users were forced to remove content, including a link to an *Ekho Moskvy* article suggesting that the Russian government could be covering up the situation and the scope of infection spread in Russia. Even Public Television of Armenia, despite being the main channel of official information, had to remove a report borrowed from CNN, mentioning the large number of COVID-19 deaths in Iran. Again, civil society’s mobilised mostly by means of social networks as there was a lockdown in place. Within a few days, the restrictions were eased, and fully lifted soon afterwards.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Armenian civil society mobilised against a law hastily adopted at an extraordinary session of the parliament on March 31, 2020, requiring telecommunication companies to collect mobile phone users’ data, such as locations, numbers called, and time of calls and text messages, in order to contain the spread of the virus. Their main concern was that there were not enough guarantees the National Security Service would appropriately store and eventually erase collected data.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, mobile data collection practice was stopped in a few weeks.

These were just some examples how civil society could mobilise effectively. Even with rather limited resources, civil society could counterbalance some potentially harmful policies, persuading the governments – which, despite some initial reluctance, took public opinion into account – to adjust their approaches. Among CSOs’ other initiatives, the awareness-building campaign about the usefulness of face masks could be particularly

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Grămadă, Cătălin Gabriel Done, “Main Trends in Disinformation in the COVID-19 Era. Study Cases: The Republic of Moldova and Romania,” Experts for Security and Global Affairs Association policy paper, August 2020, <http://www.esga.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Policy-Brief-Desinformation-1.pdf>, 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Armen Grigoryan, “Armenia: Difficult Choice ahead as Socio-Economic Risks Loom,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 115, May 2020, 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Grigoryan, “Armenia,” 9.

mentioned: as most of economic restrictions were lifted in May 2020, popular opinion was that the epidemic had essentially been over and protective measures were not needed anymore. The campaign initiated by the Union of Informed Citizens, the Armenian Institute of International and Security Affairs, and some other CSOs may have slowed the spread of infection.

Georgia's policy response and capacity to contain the spread of the virus during the first wave was the most remarkable in EaP region. That was largely the result of introducing policies based on advices of the “three musketeers” – the head of the National Centre for Disease Control, Amiran Gamkrelidze, the head of the Centre for Public Health Research (popularly known as the Lugar Lab), Paata Imnadze, and the head of infectious diseases, AIDS and immunology research centre, Tengiz Tsertsvadze. The successfulness of the adopted policies was also due to the situation when “[d]espite a typically high degree of political polarisation, Georgian society broadly supported efforts to combat the epidemic.”<sup>8</sup>

While the government's healthcare policies were cohesive and trusted by the society, Georgian CSOs could focus on filling some gaps in different, yet closely related fields. The spread of disinformation was among the main challenges the country faced. The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, the Media Development Fund and other institutions not just conducted scrupulous work, exposing a number of inauthentic social network accounts, including a fake news agency, News-Front Georgia, which was a part of a network run from Russia, but also established a working relationship with Facebook. Collected proofs ultimately allowed removing of a number of inauthentic Facebook accounts.<sup>9</sup>

Considering that perhaps the most intensively used propaganda narrative in Georgia targeted the US-funded Lugar Lab, it is also possible to compare that situation with a similar campaign against US-sponsored biological research laboratories in Armenia, run by several Russian media and Armenian proxies. Speculations that the laboratories were involved in biological weapon-related experiments ultimately targeting Russia started as soon as the laboratories started operating in 2016, and became even more intensive during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, spreading the Russo-Chinese propaganda narrative that the virus was artificially created in the United States. However, the attempts to contain propaganda and disinformation about that and other pandemic-related issues were less effective than in Georgia.<sup>10</sup> Such a difference may partly be attributed to the lack of institutional cooperation with Facebook, however, it is also worth considering that “civil

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<sup>8</sup> Rayhan Demytrie, “Coronavirus: How ‘Three Musketeers’ Helped Georgia Fight Virus,” *BBC News*, accessed January 14, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53269000>.

<sup>9</sup> “Russian Information Operation on Facebook Encouraging Political Polarization in Georgia and Inauthentic Accounts Involved in It,” International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, accessed January 12, 2021, <http://www.isfed.ge/eng/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/saqartveloshi-politikuri-polarizatsiis-khelshemtskobi-rusuli-sainformatsio-operatsia-feisbuqze-da-masshi-chartuli-araavtenturi-angarishebi>.

<sup>10</sup> Armen Grigoryan, “Disinformation and Other Tools of Antidemocratic Influence: An Armenian Outlook in the EU and Eastern Partnership Context,” *EaP Monthly Bulletin*, April 2020, [https://centreforpolicystudies.org/gallery/CPS\\_EaP\\_bulletin2.pdf](https://centreforpolicystudies.org/gallery/CPS_EaP_bulletin2.pdf).

society resources are extremely limited, many of the activities have been restricted due to redistribution of financial resources by donors or because it has been impossible to reach the final beneficiaries during this period. Even in these conditions, there was an extreme mobilisation of volunteers, of experts to inform correctly, to fight certain conspiracy theories and false debate topics.”<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusions

Some policy recommendations based on the information gathered while preparing this article could be formulated as follows.<sup>12</sup>

Governments’ communication should be coherent and not contradictory, in order not to undermine public trust. Fundamental rights and freedoms must not be compromised.

The authorities should act decisively to expose disinformation and conspiracy theories, particularly by cooperating with CSOs towards that end. As the need to promote media literacy and develop critical thinking has become obvious, expanding cooperation with CSOs and educational institutions may also be suggested. The experience of some EU member states where media literacy is taught beginning from secondary schools may be studied and similar educational programmes may be gradually implemented.

As vaccinations have begun, governments should cooperate with CSOs in order to deliver reliable information and debunk rumours and conspiracy theories as well. At the same time, considering the potential healthcare, economic, psychological, educational and other benefits of vaccination, EaP countries’ governments should also pro-actively work with the EU and other partners in order to secure the needed quantities of properly developed and tested vaccines as soon as possible.

Peer learning should be encouraged. CSOs need to get more opportunities for cooperation and learning from each other, considering possible expansion of knowledge know-how and sharing best practices. This includes both possibilities for expanding cooperation in order to deal with specific similar problems, e.g. some propaganda narratives in Armenia and Georgia, and multilateral cooperation with international institutions and EU member states’ civil society and educational institutions.

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<sup>11</sup> Angela Grămadă, “5G, Bill Gates’ ‘Desire to Have People Microchipped’ and Other Conspiracy Theories”.

<sup>12</sup> The author would like to underline that suggestions made by project partners – Angela Grămadă, Cătălin Gabriel Done, Artūrs Bikovs and Aleksandra Palkova – were especially useful for the formulation of the recommendations.

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