

CHAPTER 1

The state of civil society in the four macro-regions (Baltic Sea, Danube, Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine)

“Not only business is hit hard by the Covid crisis, but civil society too. Civil society organisations need to get restarted after the pandemic – it is a kind of year zero. We need them and the challenge could be overcome by awareness and support from governments and the EU.” This precise summary comes from Kurt from Denmark.

No wonder that Stefan from Germany also mentions the current coronavirus situation. “The biggest challenge for civil society organisations is to survive in times of Covid and economic crisis. How to overcome this is a tough and good question. It depends a lot on attitude: keeping the faith, looking for solutions, being creative, identifying new coalitions and funding opportunities.”

There is unanimous agreement on one thing: these organisations play a vital role in society. As Blaž from Slovenia notes, “they contribute to better decision-making, presenting new ideas and proposals for better governance on different levels”. The representative of a Polish NGO adds that “they involve local inhabitants in initiatives related to the development of the region, and they promote values of civil society like transparency, cooperation, and non-discrimination”.

As Jitka from Slovakia points out, “it is the common interest of civil society organisations from the 4 macro-regions to play a more active and influential role in shaping macro-regional policies. This attitude leads to an increased ownership feeling.” To make citizens more involved in macro-regional strategies, public consultations could be organised, showing details of the strategies and how they can affect the development of regions.

However, the Covid crisis is not the only problem affecting NGOs of the macro-regions. Magda, a representative of a Polish civil society organisation says: “Barriers that NGOs face are usually connected to low financial stability (cash flow), language barrier (poor level of English command), lack of experience in administrative procedures for international projects or international cooperation, limited knowledge of international networks, people working part-time / on a voluntary basis, meaning they cannot engage 100% as they have a regular job.”

Igor from Ukraine identifies two main challenges: “Poor cooperation between the government and civil society organisations. Civil society organisations' limited access to funding.” He thinks that these organisations need to make their achievements as obvious as possible in order to prove their expertise and the ability to ensure that funds are managed in a transparent and efficient manner.

NGOs' number one expertise, according to László, a Hungarian representative, is that “they know better than politicians how common people think, what the topics affecting their everyday lives are and what their demands and expectations for the future are”. When we talk about ‘bringing Europe closer to citizens’, we must also make efforts to bring local and regional communities closer to the macro-regions in Europe. Communities must be aware of the benefits of being part of a macro-region. In other words: they should be put on the political map of macro-regions.

Civil society organisations are also needed when developing targeted solutions to often complex societal challenges – this is an example that Anders from Sweden mentions. He thinks of another problem that the organisations face: they have a hard time recruiting new members

and the members are getting older. The interest in taking part in developing our societies has become lower, and people prefer spending their free time with family, friends and physical training.

Following new trends would be vital for NGOs. “New ways of influencing policies have popped up and the old-fashioned formal way – running an organisation with all its administrative burdens – is not attractive enough,” writes Meelis from Estonia.

Another aspect that everyone agrees with: NGOs have the role of contributing where there is a need in society, but where the state and other institutions do not have sufficient resources to solve it. Iuliana, a colleague from Romania comments: “Most organisations focus on providing services for disadvantaged groups, but I think most important are NGOs acting as watchdogs. Sometimes governmental authorities deviate from their role of protecting the interests of citizens, and NGOs intervene and mobilize citizens to solve the problem.”

As Marja-Liisa from Finland concludes “Trust citizens and don’t look at them as a disturbing factor”.

Specific suggestions

- The revival of civil society and CSOs should be a topic in the EU recovery package. An initial point could be doing research about the state of civil society after the pandemic. A recovery plan for civil society could stress the importance of working cross-borders and it could be done macro-region wise. (Kurt, Denmark)
- Civil society organisations of the four macro-regions should set up their own permanent framework or platform of cooperation (Johanna, Germany)
- Organising an annual meeting of civil society organisations from the 4 macro-regions, but not along traditional lines; an event with strong cultural character could be a solution. (Juraj, Slovakia)
- Systematically increase the involvement of CSO representatives on partnership bases in the governance structures of macro-regions (Miklos, Hungary)
- Citizens’ dialogue on macro-regional level should be promoted leading to an institutionalised formation; this can greatly contribute to the development of citizens’ dialogue on EU-level (Baiba, Latvia)

Additional quotes

“Civil society organisations are among the most important watchdog organisations in our political system. Against the backdrop of growing right-wing populism and fake news, they are more important than ever before.” (Christiana, Austria)

“The biggest challenge is probably the modern political situation that is quite divided and unstable. There is also the problem of low civic, social and political engagement of citizens, especially of younger generations.” (Stefano, Italy)

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