

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Covid-19; solidarity; lessons learned; increased EU integration**

“People start talking to strangers in their neighbourhood, they are more caring about each other’s health.” Anders from Sweden sees positive changes as well after the Covid pandemic.

However, negative feelings prevail when NGOs from macro-regions recall the impact of the coronavirus crisis. László from Hungary writes: “The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has clearly shown the weaknesses of the European project. The most visible achievements of sixty years of European integration were eliminated within only a few days when border controls and bans on the free movement of people, goods and services were introduced.”

As Jitka, the representative of an NGO from Slovakia puts it, “the pandemic revealed how slow and inefficient the EU decision-making process is when facing unexpected situations. The selfish and inward-looking attitude of governments further aggravated the situation.”

Expectations towards EU leaders have been particularly high due to the economic and social effects of the pandemic. Blaž from Slovenia sums up like this: “social exclusion of all generations, especially elderly people, unemployment”. Anders underlines the negative impact “on specific business sectors like hospitality, tourism and transport. Staff in health care overburdened and exhausted, leaving for other jobs.”

But there might be lessons learned from this European (and global) crisis. Ursula from France is confident: “It was difficult to anticipate the pandemic, but the advantage could be to build more Europe because the Covid situation shows us that together we are stronger.”

Unity and integration are seen as ideal solutions by other NGOs too. As there is no common European approach but only individual responses in each member state, Anders warns that it is even “difficult to provide an answer for the whole macro-region”. He proposes an interesting solution to this new situation: “Travel companies and hospitality industry need to adjust to fewer business trips and fewer conferences, but on the other hand more tourism in the macro-regions. It is important to secure cross-border collaboration also in time of pandemics.”

Local and regional initiatives have indeed gained more importance with the Covid situation. As Meelis from Estonia explains, “the closed borders created a lot of stress for inhabitants whose normal lives have been affected heavily. The Estonian-Latvian Valga/Valka border town solved this for its inhabitants without problem, enabling them to cross the border freely.”

Jan from Sweden thinks that external support would be much needed. “The Nordic and Baltic cooperation has been very much hurt by Covid-19. There should be some kind of recovery and resilience programme targeted at the Baltic Sea macro-region,” he recommends.

The situation of civil society has also been heavily affected in most macro-regions. Christiana from an Austrian NGO, for example, writes: “Many civil society organisations had to close down, either not being able to pay their staff or not being able to deliver their usual tasks. The long-term effect cannot be seen yet, but there are fears that some sectors will never recover.”

At the same time, the increased digitalisation accompanying the pandemic may have helped others. Here is an example given by Erasmo from an Italian NGO: “The Covid-19 pandemic has fostered the use of digital media and online conferencing systems and has highlighted the opportunities that digitalisation offers for citizen participation at different levels. Indeed, in

recent months, civic participation has shifted towards online forums and conferences; these modalities have helped to involve citizens in decision-making processes in a faster, broader and more inclusive way.”

The other side of the coin: the pandemic has also highlighted how access to digital tools and the digital world in general is not the same for everyone and often depends on the socio-economic conditions of the individuals. To overcome this problem, civil society has made enormous efforts during this Covid period, trying to provide digital services and tools to those who did not have access to them.

As for the role of civil society actors in the Covid-19 crisis, the delivery of food and medicine, health care, or teaching of children who had to stop normal school education are some demonstrative patterns of the civil contribution to maintaining life in Europe during the pandemic.

László has noted other types of changes as well: “In hard times people may change their attitudes towards life and values. Not so long ago, freedom, democracy, rule of law, and solidarity were perceived as abstract notions connected to political discourses, rather than parts of urgent needs of people as it is the case now. The pandemic has taught citizens to appreciate the practical meaning of European fundamental values and rights which should be strengthened in the EU policy areas, including macro-regional policies.”

Solidarity is definitely one of the European values that will need to be reinforced. As Aleksandar from Macedonia reminds us, “the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated fractures in the concept of EU solidarity. The initial intervention and later the vaccine calamity proved that for many countries their own nation is the ultimate priority. In planning future macro-regional policies, regional (cross-country) cooperation and mutual planning mechanisms should be introduced and well-established.”

Iuliana, a Romanian NGO representative recalls the social consequences of the coronavirus crisis. “From a social point of view, people were divided into pro and contra camps and generated discussions especially in the media and social media. Citizens have become suspicious, distrustful and this led to frustration.”

Information through the media was essential. According to Sabine, an NGO representative from Germany, “the information was not always factual, and fears were sometimes reinforced. Clarification by scientists was important to objectify the discussions, but conspiracy theories and corona deniers also shaped the communication. This showed how important free and independent media are.”

### **Specific suggestions**

- In the implementation of macro-regional policies, more focus should be laid on fields such as health, education, training and digitalisation which have gained much greater public attention during the pandemic. (Nora, Hungary)
- Providing digital services and tools to social groups that do not have access to them (Stefano, Italy)
- The European Solidarity Corps initiative should be used more systematically to develop a sense of care and togetherness among young people. (Stavros, Greece)

## Additional quotes

- *“Given the huge dimension of the crisis, it has turned out in daily conversations with citizens that the failure of the EU to order enough vaccines will most probably have devastating long-term effects on the acceptance of the Union.” (Hannes, Austria)*
- *“The Covid-19 crisis has critically affected communication between people. I am strongly convinced that the boost of virtual communication technologies cannot be a substitute for live communication to build new contacts and share ideas.” (Igor, Ukraine)*

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